

#04: Covenant of Promise - Abraham

By Dr. O. Palmer Robertson

sermonaudio.com

Mount Olive Tape Library

c/o Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
P.O. Box 770
Taylors, SC 29687

Website: www.gpts.edu

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/mtolive

The Abrahamic covenant, we have characterized this covenant as Abraham, the covenant of promise.

If you look at Genesis chapter 12 verse one you note immediately the sovereign character of this covenantal relationship which God establishes with a man named Abraham. Genesis 12 verse one, “The Lord said unto Abraham, ‘You get out of your country and you go away from your kindred and from your father’s house and go unto the land that I will show you.’”

Here we have no possible suggestion of contract or mutual bargaining. God does not say to Abraham, “If you will do this then I will do that. If you will be so kind as to pack up your belongings and leave your fatherland, then I will really give you something nice.”

No, God says sovereignly, “You go out from this land.”

This same note of sovereign administration is found in Genesis chapter 17 verses one and two at the time of the institution of the seal of this covenant which is the seal of circumcision. Chapter 17 verses one and two, “And when Abram was 90 years old and nine the Lord appeared to Abram and said unto him, ‘I am God almighty. You walk before me and you be perfect and I will make my covenant between me and thee and I will multiply thee exceedingly.’” Again, it is quite obvious that the emphasis here is on the authoritative command of God almighty who will establish his covenant bond with this man named Abraham.

In Genesis chapter 15 we have the passage of Scripture which in many ways is one of the most mysterious and interesting passages of all of Scripture and which may in the end prove to be the most significant of all of the passages of the Bible dealing with the covenant concept. This is the passage in which the Abrahamic is instituted sovereignly by God. Although God has been dealing with Abraham for some time, now we have the record of the formal inauguration of this covenantal relationship.

If you look at verse eight of Genesis 15 you get immediately into the spirit of the thing. In the earlier verses of the chapter God has renewed his promise to Abraham that he is to multiply his seed exceedingly. But Abraham is perplexed. He is still childless. And so you can feel something of the pain of this cry to the Lord. And he says, “Oh, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit this. I do not doubt your Word. I believe your

promises. You have said that I shall have a seed that cannot be numbered. I accept that Word, but how can I know? How can I be certain?"

Here you feel the cry of the Christian that comes constantly. "Oh, Lord, how can I know? How can I be sure? How can I be confident that your promises are true?"

Now God responds in verses nine and ten in a most unusual way. It is a way which is difficult for us in this culture to understand. "God said unto Abraham, "Take a heifer three years old and a she goat three years old and a ram three years old and a turtle dove and a young pigeon." And Abraham took him all these and he knew what to do with them. He divided them in the midst and laid each half over against the other making something of a passage way between the pieces of the animals. But the birds divided he not.

You notice also that in verse 11 when the birds of prey come down upon the carcasses Abraham realizes his responsibility is to protect these sacrificial pieces. The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses and Abraham drove them away.

Now Dr. Morris' book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* is one that you all should possess and should read and study very carefully. Read especially his chapter on the covenant concept. It is one of the finest treatments you will find anywhere with good balance, with perfect treatment of respect of the holy Scriptures and an accurate, scholarly treatment of the concept of the covenant. In this book and in other books such as Meredith Klein's *By Oath Consigned* we find an explanation of what is happening.

In the Near Eastern practice of covenant making ceremonies the pieces of a sacrificial animal were divided. The covenantal parties passed between these pieces thereby calling upon themselves an oath of self malediction. That is, they were saying, "May God do so to me and more also if I violate the stipulations of this covenant."

In other words, we have an imagery here of curse of self. "May I be cursed. May my body be as this body, this sacrificial animal. May I be ripped in pieces if I violate the stipulations of this bond into which we are entering at this point."

Abraham knows what to do with these animals. And so he arranges just such an occasion.

Now then we read in verses 12 and following of this chapter that Abraham falls into a deep sleep. He has a vision of what is to happen to the Israelite people. They shall be for four generations in captivity. And then in verse 17 and 18 we have the actual description of the initiation of this covenant bond. "And it came to pass that when the sun went down and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces."

A theophanic manifestation of the Lord God himself. God now passing between these pieces. God himself is pledging himself to self destruction if he should break this covenant promise which he has made to Abraham.

Notice verse 18, "Then that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram."

What is a covenant? A covenant is a bond of life and death. More particularly, based on this Near Eastern way of covenantal celebration and inauguration, a covenant is a bond in blood sovereign administered, a bond in blood sovereignly administered.

Now this particular passage in Genesis 15 takes on even greater significance if you remember that we have here the first inauguration of God's covenantal relation with his chosen people. To this point God had been dealing basically with individuals or groups. But now he is going to deal with one line in particular, the Abrahamic line. So we have in Genesis 15 the beginning of the formation of a people to be God's own.

Then you turn later in your Scriptures to the book of Jeremiah chapter 34. And in this passage of Scripture we find echoes very clearly given to us of this same covenantal ceremony. The context of Jeremiah 34 is one in which Jerusalem is under siege by Babylon. Zedekiah the king of Israel at this time is greatly concerned. He is seeking to recover the favor of God. For at least he knows that if nothing else will work, as Dr. Morris says, then perhaps we should resort to prayer. You know, since we haven't been able to repel the Babylonians any other way then let's return to the Lord and maybe that will help us.

So Zedekiah the king assembles all the people. And in this assembly he initiates a covenant renewal ceremony. He pledges and leads the people of Israel in this assembly in a ceremony which shall reestablish the covenant relationship. You notice verses eight through 10 of Jeremiah 34 describe to us the consequences or the after affects of this covenant renewal ceremony. "The word that came unto Jeremiah from Jehovah. After that king Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people that were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty unto them that every man should let his manservant and every man his maidservant that is a Hebrew or a Hebrewess go free that none should make bondmen of them to wit of a Jew his brother. And all the princes and all the people obeyed that had entered into the covenant that everyone should let his manservant and everyone his maidservant go free that none should make bondmen of them anymore. They obeyed and let them go."

Zedekiah is going back to the Mosaic law. This was a very important law in Israel that in every seventh year any Hebrew who had gotten so far in BankAmericard problems that he had to sell himself into slavery would be released on the seventh year debt free. You were once bondmen in Egypt. I let you go. Therefore you will let one another go every seventh year. You can keep your heathen slaves all you wish, but you must let your Hebrew slaves go.

In each of the three law institutes of the Old Testament we have the record of this particular law or stipulation. So this is what Zedekiah is doing on this particular occasion. But notice verse 11. They just couldn't stick with it. "But afterwards they turned and

caused the servants and their handmaids whom they had let go free to return and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids.”

The dear southern belle of Israel got back in that hot kitchen and cooked a couple of meals and said, “No, sir, I can’t take this. You go get my helper back and we will proceed as we have.”

So Jeremiah then in the following verses gives his remonstrance to Israel. He tells and renews how God had made a covenant, God had let them free and now in verses 17 he speaks the sovereign Word of God to them. “Therefore, thus saith the Lord, ye have not hearkened unto me to proclaim liberty every man to his brother and every man to his neighbor. Behold I proclaim unto you a liberty saith the Lord to the sword and to pestilence and to the famine and I will make you to be tossed to and fro among all the kingdoms of the earth.” And put outside that verse right there Deuteronomy 28:25. Deuteronomy 28 is the record of the curses of the Mosaic covenant. “You shall be tossed to and fro among all the peoples of the earth. And that is exactly what Jeremiah is saying to them. The curses of the covenant are going to come upon you. And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, that have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before me—now notice—when they cut the calf in twain and passed between the parts thereof. The princes of Judah and the princes of Jerusalem and the eunuchs and the priests and all the people of the land that passed between the parts of the calf I will even give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of them that seek their life and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds.”

Abraham, you will remember, shooed the birds but now there will be no one to frighten the birds away. “And their dead bodies shall be devoured as part of the curse upon them.”

Now to get the full significance I feel we know or can sense something of the weight of terror of the curses of the covenant of God upon those who are God’s covenantal breakers. But to get the full significance of this passage of Scripture in its whole biblical theological significance we need to note several points. And we will list by points that will help us to understand the great significance of the appearance of this passage of Scripture.

We must remember now that we are 1300 years after Abraham. Here we have the beginning of the covenantal relationship with Israel. Now we have the very end of it. They are about to go away into captivity. Jeremiah 34 is at the end of Israel’s history. And it is quite obvious that Jeremiah is not reflecting Genesis 15 as though it were some piece of archive. It is something living and vital in the minds of his own contemporaries.

So these points we note to point out the significance of this passage of Scripture.

First of all, the language of this passage parallels the language of Genesis 15. In verses 18, 19 and 20 it is most obvious that the language parallels the language of Genesis 15. They cut the calf in twain and passed between the pieces thereof. They passed between the parts of the calf and their dead bodies shall be food unto the birds of the heavens.

Now the second point that we would note to bring out the significance of this passage is that Jeremiah's allusion must connect with something that has happened to the people at this covenant inauguration ceremony. It is not simply a literary allusion to something in Israel's past, but it is an allusion to something that the people did on this particular occasion. Notice again verse eight. "Zedekiah caused the people to make a covenant." Again, verse 10, "All the people obeyed the covenant." And the very brunt of Jeremiah's argument in verses 18 and 19 is to this effect, "You are the ones that passed between the pieces, not Abraham 1300 years ago, but you did it. By your covenant renewal ceremony, you had a formal worship service and you passed between the pieces." And he names out everybody that went through the pieces. He says the priests went through. The eunuch's went through. The people...all of the people went between the pieces of the calves.

So he is not simply in a literary fashion echoing that which is written in Genesis 15, but he is talking about something which his own contemporaries had done.

Now the third major point that we would point out to show the significance of this passage is that the pattern of covenant renewal followed on this occasion must have been of the Mosaic sort and not of the Abrahamic sort. In other words, they had a little bit of liturgy. They didn't have any liturgy so far as we can understand or discover in Scripture in order that they could go through the process of renewing the Abrahamic covenant, but they had a lot of liturgy to renew the Mosaic covenant.

This fact is proven by the long history of covenant renewal ceremonies throughout Israel's history. The whole book of Deuteronomy, for instance, is a covenant renewal ceremony in which Moses led the people in the renewal of their covenant just before they entered into the land of promise.

Notice also Joshua chapter 24, 2 Kings chapter 23, Nehemiah chapter eight. In all these instances we had the reading of the Mosaic law in conjunction with the inauguration of the covenant relationship.

So then this point that we are making is that the ceremony being followed was not that of Genesis 15, but it was that of the Mosaic period.

Now the fourth point that we would point out here follows from points two and three. If the people on this occasion of covenant renewal under Zedekiah did something that pledged themselves to death and if the ceremony which they were following was of the Mosaic pattern, then we conclude something in the Mosaic pattern must have echoed that which was in the Abrahamic pattern of covenant inauguration. And let's get over that again.

Here we are with Abraham and in the Abrahamic covenant we have a pledge to death by passing between the pieces. Here we are in Jeremiah following the pattern of the Mosaic covenant which is here in Exodus 24 in particular. It is driving that covenant ceremony.

And we are saying that something in this covenant renewal ceremony must have been present here or something of this thought must have been here also. In other words, what we are saying is that both in the Abrahamic covenant and in the Mosaic covenant we have as one of the most essential aspects of the covenant inauguration ceremony the pledge to death.

What is a covenant? Whether we are speaking of the Abraham covenant, whether we are speaking of the Mosaic covenant, whether we are speaking of the covenant renewal ceremony of Jeremiah, what is a covenant? It is a bond of life and death. And more particularly, it is a bond in blood.

Now, fifthly, we would suggest that perhaps—and this we cannot be certain about—but perhaps that in the Mosaic ceremony which corresponds to that in the Abrahamic ceremony, that pledge to death element, may be the blood sprinkling aspect of the Mosaic ceremony. If you look at Exodus chapter 24 verse eight notice how the covenant is concluded. Exodus 24:8, “And Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you concerning these words.’”

Now it seems that we have in this blood two symbolic meanings. One is the cleansing of the people. The blood was the element of cleansing, preparation so that they would be worthy participants in the covenant. But we have also the pledge to death. And it may be—now this is all in the perhaps ahead of us—it may be that simply for the sheer reason of statistics, because they could not arrange a massive number of sacrificial animals and have a parade of one million people pass through those pieces in order to pledge them to death they substituted this equally significant ceremony of the blood sprinkling. This is the blood of the covenant. And the people respond and they say, “All that you have commanded us we will do. We accept this pledge to death. We accept this sovereignly administered bond in blood” And when we use “accept” we must use it with qualification. For as we realize, this is a sovereign administration of God.

So then we have quite interestingly—and even without the perhaps, the fifth point—we must say that something in the Mosaic ceremony corresponded to the pledge to death of the Abraham ceremony. Perhaps they understood the sacrifices of the animals on that day as being in part a reflection of the Genesis 15 experience. But in any case throughout the covenantal dealings of God with his people the significant aspect that we are noting here is the bond in blood, the sovereign administration of a pledge to death.

Now it is very interesting if you will note, we have something of a long historical gap here between Moses and Jeremiah. And yet there is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that this cursed aspect of the covenant is running throughout the whole history of Israel. And let me just point out a few passages that make it quite plain that this is not just something at the beginning and the end of Israel’s history, but something that runs consistently throughout Israel’s history.

Abraham, you remember, was the first. He frightened away the birds of prey. This was the symbol of the ultimate curse of the covenant, that the animal world would devour the human flesh. That was a terrible aspect of the covenant inauguration ceremony. How striking it is to find this identical woe or possibility of woe spoken over Israel in the context of the curses and blessings involved in the Mosaic covenant.

Look at Deuteronomy chapter 26 verse 28 where Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, the curses and the blessings of the covenant were to be read. If you keep the covenants you will be blessed in the field and you will be blessed in your home and so forth and so on. And if you break this covenant cursed will you be in the field and cursed will be your families.

And now notice Deuteronomy 28:26, “And thy dead body shall be food unto all birds of the heavens and unto the beasts of the earth and there shall be none to frighten them away.”

It is this very covenantal curse in particular that is reflected throughout the history of Israel as displaying most vividly the consequences of covenant violation. Israel has pledged itself to death. Therefore we read in 1 Kings 14:11 as a consequences of the violation of the covenant on this occasion, Ahijah the prophet pronounces the covenant curse on the house of Jeroboam. “Him that dieth of Jeroboam in the city shall the dogs eat. And him that dieth in the field shall the birds of the heavens eat. For the Lord has spoken it.”

The same curse rests on the house of Baasha. In 1 Kings 16:14, “Him that dieth of Baasha in the cit shall the dogs eat and him that dieth of him in the field shall the birds of the heavens eat.”

Nor did the house of Ahab escape the ultimate curse of covenant transgressions, 1 Kings 21:24, “Him that dieth of Ahab in the city the dogs shall eat and him that dieth in the fields shall the birds of the heavens eat.”

This curse is applied in particular to Jezebel, 2 Kings 9:12, “The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the portion of Jezreel and there shall be none to bury her.”

It is quite significant to notice in Jeremiah’s own prophetic word and throughout his book an emphasis on this covenantal curse. Jeremiah 7:33, “And the dead bodies of this people shall be food for the birds of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth and none shall frighten them away.” Jeremiah 16:4, “Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth.” Jeremiah 19:7, “Their dead bodies will I give to be food for the birds of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth.”

Still further reference is found to this same identical covenantal curse in the lament over fallen Jerusalem in Psalm 79. If you will look at Psalm 79 verses one and following. “Oh God, the nations are come into thine inheritance. Thy holy temple have they defiled. They have laid Jerusalem in heaps. The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be

food unto the birds of the heavens. The flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water around about Jerusalem and there was none to bury them.”

Well now we have something of a fuller picture of the covenantal relationship and the terrible effects of those who would violate the covenant beginning with Genesis 15, echoed in Exodus 24 running throughout the book of Kings [?] victory in Jeremiah followed by Psalm 79. The theme is the same of the covenantal destruction of those who violate the covenant of God.

But we don't want to stay there. Let us feel for a moment something of the weight of the curse that is on us. Let us remember that even as they are created in the image of God we are pledged to death for violation of that covenant. Let us remember that our just dessert are the curses of this covenant, that our bodies be torn in pieces and that the birds of the heavens [?] are fled.

But let us not remain there. Let us remember also the blessings of the covenant and the New Testament itself picks up this very same theme to give us the joyous news that relief from the covenantal curses has been given to us through Jesus Christ quite specifically if you will look in Hebrews chapter nine.

Now the epistle to the Hebrews has been called quite appropriately by Gerhardus Vos of old Princeton as the epistle of the διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay'-kay), the epistle of the covenant. And it is most interesting to read Hebrews chapter nine in the light of what we have learned concerning covenantal curse.

If you will notice in Hebrews nine verses 18 and following, the context is one of covenant inauguration. He is quoting Exodus 24, reminding them of the inauguration and the blood of sprinkling which consecrated a people to God in Hebrews chapter nine verses 18 and following. “Wherefore even the first covenant hast not been dedicated without blood. For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses unto all the people according to the law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats with water and scarlet, wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people saying, “This is the blood of the covenant.”

Now the verses we want to get to in particular are verses 16 and 17. But before we can do that we have to diverge for just a moment to deal with this term διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay'-kay). If you have your King James before you if you look in Hebrews chapter nine you notice quite consistently in verses 15 and following you have the reading, “For this cause he is the mediator of the new testament.” Now testament is a last will and testament. That is something that someone writes and then after he dies it comes into effect. Verse 16, “For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.” Verse 17, “For a testament is of force after men are dead,” and so forth.

Now if you look over at Hebrews chapter eight in your King James, verse six, very interesting, “He is the mediator of a better covenant.” Verse seven, “For if that first

covenant had been faultless...” Verse nine, “Not according to the covenant that I made,” and so forth.

Now check next to you. Perhaps you have a student who has a Greek Testament with him and you will see that the word throughout is διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay) consistently διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay). And it is true that there is an unusual duplicity in this term. But the argument that we are making at this point and we are growing far...we are just...we are not bringing you into the kitchen to see all the dirty work that is involved in a conclusion like this, but the conclusion is that the term διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay) throughout this passage should be translated covenant, consistently covenant.

Now we have some brief point that we could point up to emphasize or to justify that translation noticing, for instance, that in the Septuagint the Greek translation of the Old Testament always the term διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay) means covenant.

We notice, secondly, that in the New Testament out of 16 times that the term διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay) appears in the New Testament outside of Hebrews it is translated covenant. We notice that in the book of Hebrews where the term διαθηκη (dee-ath-ay’-kay) occurs 17 times, in every instance it is translated covenant except in verses 16 and 17. And so we wonder. Is it convincing to suggest that our writer to the Hebrews has played a little pun with us? He reads covenant, covenant, covenant, testament, testament, covenant, covenant, covenant, speaking of that Old Testament concept and now the last will and testament and now, again, of an Old Testament concept. We are not convinced.

And so we look at verses 16 and 17 in this light beginning...and if you will note in verse 17 in particular your English translation is quite misleading here. Literally the words read in verse 17, “For a covenant is made firm over dead bodies. A covenant is made firm over dead bodies.

Now what have we got? We have here a reflection of the long history of covenantal curses and pledging to death. And notice also verse 16. “For where a covenant is there must of necessity be brought in the death of him that made it.” And here is the reason that the people translated this word “testament.” A testament doesn’t come of force, a last will, until a person dies. But what has death got to do with a covenant? We know that death has everything to do with a covenant inauguration ceremony. A death must be represented.

So in verse 16 we read, “For where a testament is or a covenant is, of necessity the death of him that made it must be represented.” And the term here is verified, must be brought in. What are we imagining? A corpse being paraded around to convince everyone that the man is dead and his will may be brought into effect? No. We are talking of the covenant inauguration ceremony.

So then we read, “For where a covenant is, of necessity there must be represented the death of him that made it for a covenant is made firm over dead bodies.” And making the last phrase a question for, “Does a covenant ever avail until while he that made it liveth?”

That is, until his death has been represented in the covenant inauguration ceremony, the covenant is not in effect.

But the point to note here in this passage is not simply that a death is represented. The point is found in verse 15, that a death has taken place. And for this cause Christ is the mediator of the new covenant that a death having taken place of the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, they have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Yes, you have been pledged to death. Yes, you are a covenant violator. But a death has taken place to deliver you from the curses of the covenant. Christ has come and Christ has died to deliver us from the curses of God's covenant.

To conclude this somewhat involved treatment of the covenant with Abraham, this covenant is especially to be characterized as the covenant of promise. By the solemn ceremony described in Genesis 15 in which the theophany passes through the slain pieces, God promises.

Read Genesis 15 carefully and you will notice that Abraham does not pass between the pieces. The Lord God passes between the pieces. And the Lord God almighty says, "I will assume to myself the curses of this covenant that I may see that you receive the blessings of this covenant."

Did any have imagined the consummation of these words to lonely Abraham? Could any have imagined Emmanuel, Christ coming, taking on himself on our behalf the curses of this covenant? Oh, come. Let us adore him. For in him we see Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God who has given himself, taken on himself the curses of the covenant that we might be delivered from those curses.

Let us pray.

Merciful Father, forgive us when our gratitude is so small. Grant to us some appreciation we pray of what Christ the Lord has endured for us. Grant to us that new joy and song of the assurance of those who know that God has promised and has now fulfilled his promise. Lord our God, give us faith to hear your Word, to believe it and to rejoice in it for we ask these things to the glory of that humble Savior who gave himself and his back to the smiters for our sake, even Jesus the Christ. Amen.