

The Abrahamic Covenant

Text: Gen. 15:7-21

Introduction:

1. This chapter of Genesis contains some very significant, foundational truths that particularly affect two important areas of Bible doctrine:
 - Israelology – God’s covenant with Abraham is formalised in this passage. We refer to it as the Abrahamic Covenant. It is foundational to a right understanding of God’s plan for Israel.
 - Soteriology – This chapter and particularly verse 6 forms the backbone of the doctrine of justification by faith. The Apostle Paul appeals to it in both Romans and Galatians as a major argument in His thesis of Salvation.
2. In the previous sermon we focused primarily on that great theme of justification by faith in verse 6. We will now delve further into the details of the Abrahamic Covenant and the ceremony that was conducted to ratify that covenant.
3. The outline we are working with for the chapter is as follows:
 - The Context of the Covenant (Vs. 1-3)
 - The Contents of the Covenant (Vs. 4-7)
 - The Ceremony of the Covenant (Vs. 8-12)
 - The Confirmation of the Covenant (Vs. 13-21)

I. THE CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT (VS. 1-3)

Let’s set the scene and the occasion of the giving of this covenant. Take note of:

- A. The Battle of the Enemy (Vs. 1a)
- B. The Blessing of the Lord (Vs. 1b)
- C. The Bewilderment of Abraham (Vs. 2-3)

II. THE CONTENTS OF THE COVENANT (VS. 4-7)

Abraham’s plea forms the basis for the covenant promise that follows. There are two main promises in the Abrahamic Covenant. God had promised these two things to Abraham previously but now further Revelation is given and the promises are ratified in a covenant. In the Abrahamic Covenant there is:

A. The Promise of a Seed (Vs. 4-6)

B. The Promise of a Land (Vs. 7; 18-21)

1. The Beneficiaries of the Land (Vs. 7)
 - a. The land would be given to Abraham and to his descendants.
 - b. Notice how this is a repeated theme in Scripture:
 - i. Genesis 13:15 – “For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.”
 - ii. Genesis 15:7 – “...to give thee this land to inherit it.”
 - iii. Genesis 15:18 – “In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land...”

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2. The Boundaries of the Land (Vs. 18-21)

These verses spell out the geographical area that would be given to Abraham and his seed. There are a number of markers given that outline the extent of the promised land. Take notice of:

- a. The Geographical markers (Vs. 18b). Two rivers are mentioned as forming the outer boundaries of the promised land.
 - i. The River of Egypt – forms the southern boundary of the promised land. This could be a reference to the Nile River but it is more likely the stream south of Gaza now known as Wadi El Arish.
 - ii. The River Euphrates – forms the northern boundary of the promised land.
- b. The Nation markers (Vs. 19-20). Israel would possess the land in between these two rivers that was inhabited at that time by these 10 nations.
- c. The closest Israel got to the full possession of the promised land was during the reign of Solomon. But in reality, Israel has never fully possessed the entire covenant land but she will one day in the Millennium.
- d. “Solomon exercised dominion over a vast area (1 Kings 4:21; Ps. 72:8), but Israel did not possess all that land. The kings merely acknowledged Solomon’s sovereignty and paid tribute to him. When Jesus Christ reigns from the throne of David (Matt. 19:28; Lk. 1:32), the land of Israel will reach the full dimensions promised by God.” (Wiersbe)

III. THE CEREMONY OF THE COVENANT (VS. 8-12)

The ceremony was initiated by God in response to Abraham’s request for an assurance in verse 8. It is significant that immediately following the reference to Abraham being justified by faith, we have the blood sacrifice. It demonstrates the truth that God only justifies the sinner on the basis of the shedding of the blood. Henry Morris writes, “The ceremony not only confirmed the promise, but was highly instructive. The provision of imputed righteousness and full salvation is altogether God’s gift of grace to man, but it would be highly costly to God. The curse of sin can be removed only by sacrifice, in the shedding of blood. God stresses its necessary connection with His promise.” Let us consider this ceremony and how it is rich in pictures of Christ.

A. The Specifics of the Ceremony (Vs. 8-9)

1. The question (Vs. 8)
 - a. This was not unbelief on Abraham’s part. “This inquiry was not filled with unbelief. Abraham is seeking to know more about God’s promise. He wanted to have his faith strengthened. Abraham was not questioning the possibility of the promise but the method by which the inheritance would be made legal and certain. Inheritances require some legality. Abraham is looking for that, and God gave it to him in the covenant ceremony which follows.” (John Butler)

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- b. Sometimes inquiries of faith and unbelief look alike on the surface but it depends on the underlying heart attitude and condition. Compare the question of Zacharias Vs. that of Mary's (Lk. 1:18; Lk. 1:34)¹. "One said it cannot be done; the other said it could be done but wanted to know the way it was going to be done. A big difference indeed!" (Butler)
 - c. Abraham wanted to know more about what God had told him and his desire was rewarded with further revelation. If you accept God's Word by faith at face value with an honest and sincere heart but desire to know and understand more, that is a godly desire that is likely to be honoured by the Lord.
2. The custom (Vs. 9)
- a. This ceremony was a part of cutting a covenant. Interestingly, the word 'covenant' actually means "to cut".
 - b. This ancient custom of cutting a blood covenant is referred to in Jeremiah 34:18-19 – "And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof, The princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf." In this case, the children of Judah had broken the covenant they had made with God, a very serious matter.
 - c. Wiersbe explains this ancient custom well, "What is described in 15:9-17 was known in that day as "cutting a covenant". This solemn ritual involved the death of animals and the binding of people to a promise. The persons making the covenant would sacrifice several animals and divide the bodies, placing the halves opposite to each other on the ground. Then the parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrifices in declaration, that if they failed to keep their word, they deserved the same fate as the animals (See Jer. 34:18-19)."

B. The Sacrifices of the Ceremony (Vs. 9-12)

Look at how these sacrifices picture Christ:

1. The number of sacrifices – there were five in total. Pictures the abundance and the completeness of God's provision of salvation.
2. The types of sacrifices - "Each of the three animals' names here were tame ones, not wild and needing to be captured by Abram; instead, they were the willing servants of man's need. Each one foreshadowed a distinctive aspect of Christ's perfections and work. The heifer of three years seems to have pointed to the freshness of His vigour; the goat, gave the sin-offering aspect; the ram is the animal that in the Levitical offerings was connected specially with consecration. The birds told of One from Heaven." (Pink)

¹ Luke 1:18 "And Zacharias said unto the angel, **Whereby shall I know this?** for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." Luke 1:34 "Then said Mary unto the angel, **How shall this be,** seeing I know not a man?"

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3. The age of the sacrifices – the three main sacrifices were all to be three years old. Christ had a three-year ministry before He was sacrificed on the cross.
4. The slaying of the sacrifices – the animals were slain and divided in two. Christ was slain on the cross, shedding His blood for our redemption.
5. The horror of great darkness – reminds us of the last three hours of the cross when the Lord Jesus was made sin for us. The word 'horror' has the sense of 'fear' or 'dread'. As Abram fell into a sleep/trance type of vision, it was horror provoking in its darkness. (Sorenson)

IV. THE CONFIRMATION OF THE COVENANT (VS. 13-21)

In these verses God spells out the details of the Abrahamic Covenant.

A. The Prophecies of the Covenant (Vs. 13-16)

1. A National Prophecy concerning Israel (Vs. 13-14; 16)
They would be:
 - a. Strangers in the Land of Egypt (Vs. 13a).
 - b. Slaves in the Land of Egypt (Vs. 13b)
 - c. Set free from the Land of Egypt (Vs. 14, 16).
 - i. Two time markers are given in these verses – “four hundred years” and the “fourth generation”. So that means that a generation was a hundred years.
 - ii. An interesting reason is given by God as to why there would be a 400-year (four generation) time frame before the Israelites would return to the land. It was because the “iniquity of the Amorites” was not yet full. The word ‘full’ had the idea of complete.
 - iii. When the seed of Abraham returned to the promised land, they were to wipe out the Canaanite nations. But they had a 400-year window to repent! What a testament to the longsuffering of God. This should be remembered when critics label the “God of the Old Testament” a cruel, harsh God.
 - iv. The “full cup” principle is also a reminder of the certainty of God’s just judgment. God does not give mankind an unlimited period of time to repent. Once a nations or an individual’s cup of iniquity is full, God will judge.
2. A Personal Prophecy concerning Abraham (Vs. 15)
Abraham would be spared going through the difficulties his seed would go through in Egypt. His work for the Lord would be finished before then. He would enjoy:
 - a. A peaceful end. Because we have peace with God through salvation, we can also know this peace at the time of our passing out of this life and into the next.
 - b. A protracted life. This was God’s will for Abraham. It may or may not be God’s will for you to have a long life. What matters is that you finish the “course” God has for you (Acts 20:24; 2 Tim. 4:7).
 - c. Genesis 25:7-9 documents the fulfillment of this promise. “And these are the days of the years of Abraham’s life which he lived,

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an hundred threescore and fifteen years. Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.”

B. The Performance of the Covenant (Vs. 17-21)

1. What Abraham saw was “a portable clay oven, a couple of feet high, more or less like an inverted bowl, with a hole on the upper side for draft purposes. This ‘firepot’ has fire within it kindled and flaming out of the top of the oven like a ‘torch’. This firepot plus the flaming torch above pass in between the pieces of the animals.” (Leupold)
2. Normally this covenant would require both parties to walk between the pieces but in making this covenant with Abraham, only God Almighty passes between the pieces. It reveals that this would be an unconditional covenant. God Himself would guarantee it for His covenant people. “Only God passed through, not Abram, denoting an unconditional promise on God’s part, not dependent on Abram’s fulfilling his part of the contract, since he had no such part. It was all of God, in response to Abram’s believing faith.” (Morris)
3. This was a covenant of God’s grace. God made promises to Abraham, not Abraham to God. There were no conditions attached to this covenant. God alone would guarantee its fulfillment.
4. In a similar fashion, Christ walked the Calvary Road alone and paid for the New Covenant with His own life’s blood. Pastor Kyle Sutton writes, “Some 2,000 years later, Messiah cut a new covenant with Israel, and like He did with Abram, He walked it alone – at the cross. Just as a “horror of great darkness fell upon Abraham”, a horrible darkness fell over the land that Passover day, 32 AD.”
5. At the cross our Lord Jesus secured our eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12 “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained **eternal redemption for us.**” (Heb. 9:12)
6. Hebrews 13:20-21 “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom *be* glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Conclusion:

1. Be encouraged in the truth that God is a covenant keeping God. His promises are sure and can be trusted.
2. Have you entered into the blessings of the New Covenant through repentance and faith?