

The Covenant Story: The Beginning

Series: *What Is the Gospel?*

September 18, 2016

Randy Lovelace

This morning marks the beginning of a new series that we will be working on together throughout this fall and into the new year. This series is entitled, *What Is the Gospel?* And there are various ways in which we can answer that question. It's important for us to look at the question and not presume that we know the answer, or presume that we know the answer because we know one part of the story. And so we will begin this series, *What Is the Gospel?* this morning by looking at it through a particular vantage point.

But before I get there I want to tell you a brief story from a mentor of mine, Brian Chappell. Dr. Brian Chappell was my professor of homiletics and then went on to be the president of Covenant Theological Seminary, and he now serves as a pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in Illinois. He's written many books. One of the ones that many of you perhaps have seen, perhaps you haven't—and we hope to have copies of this—it is his brief treatise on *What Is the Gospel?* Of all the things he could say, this is how he began to answer that question.

He said, “The events that led to his [brother’s] arrest had been years in the making. When he was growing up my family recognized that my brother had some developmental disabilities, but he was still quite active. Indeed, as he grew, while his mind did not develop as quickly as his body, he grew to become increasingly strong—not only physically, but also his will. As his parents aged, stresses of caring for him and worry about his development were heavy on their hearts. As an adult David's desire for independence and his developmental disabilities were a constant concern both for me and my family. For friendship and thrills he developed relationships that spelled trouble. The obvious resulted. His arrest and confinement were more than his mind could process. He knew only the overwhelming fear that someone with his ability would experience in a jail cell. He huddled in a corner and trembled. My brother's obvious fear rekindled something in the heart of another man that shared his cell. And despite his own difficulties, this man shared with my brother David the message of God's mercy when he said, ‘Jesus can help you. Trust him.’ The truths of Sunday school lessons began to come back to David. He prayed for God to forgive him and trusted in Jesus as his Savior as an adult. My brother David will be in jail for a long time. But he will also be with Jesus forever: forgiven, restored, treasured, and transformed. This is the gospel for my brother and for all who trust in Jesus.

The Gospel simply means, ‘good news.’ The Bible uses the term to refer to the message that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue broken people, to restore creation’s glory, and to rule over all with compassion and justice. A short summary of the Gospel is given for us in 1 Timothy 1:15: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” That is the Gospel.

Having said that, the Gospel is also so much more. Were we to stop there we would be perfectly orthodox in our understanding of what Jesus came to do, our need of a Savior, and the reality of sin and the brokenness that it causes. But there are more ways of looking at the

Gospel then simply by looking at what took place on Good Friday when Jesus would go to the cross as a Savior in our place. Indeed, the Gospel does not begin where the New Testament begins. It is a very old story. Though you will not see the word 'gospel' in Genesis, it's there. And it goes from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation. There are various lenses through which we could look at the Gospel, and what we want to do this fall is to look at it through a particular lens, and that lens is the lens of covenant. So you see in your outline: **Introduction**, the **Theme**, and the **Promise**. **Introduction**, **Theme**, and **Promise**.

As I just said, as we think about the **Introduction**, what is the Gospel? It is 1 Timothy 1:15. "For Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." But as I stated, the Gospel is bigger than any of us—than any of us can imagine. That God's purposes are so incredibly grand that we can say the following: that you and I, (if you are a believer), or David Chappell, for that matter—that we are not the end of what God is doing in the work of redemption. The Gospel does not begin simply with God's promise and end at where it intersects with your will and you come to know Jesus the Savior. The Gospel is a much bigger story than just any one person's salvation. Indeed, it's bigger than any one nation's salvation, as in the story of Israel. The Gospel is bigger than the cosmos because it emanates from the one who is the Creator of All Things.

So as we think about the introduction of understanding what is the gospel through the lens of covenant, there are various ways in which it's been summarized throughout church history. One way it's been summarized within the Reformation tradition has been what you've heard us refer to before and will refer to again throughout the fall—that is, the Four Chapter Gospel: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. And so you see that God demonstrates his grace in creation, he demonstrates his grace at the fall, he demonstrates his grace at redemption, and he demonstrates his grace through restoration. But we need to be clear. It isn't just merely the restoration of a sinner with their Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is that, but it is also the restoration of all things. And I'm going to do something I don't normally do. Say it with me: All Things. Ready? One, two, three: All Things. Everything. Because God has created all things.

And so what we're going to do this fall—we're going to be looking at covenant, first as the covenant story. And we're going to be looking at the covenant story as it unfolds like a straight line through its progressive revelation. We begin this morning at the beginning, but then we will move to Noah and Moses, David, Abraham—all the way to the New Covenant. And after we look at the covenant story we will then look specifically at the Trinity, but through the perspective of covenant, because He is the covenant maker. How do we understand who God is—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—through the lens of his covenant-making purposes. And then at Advent we will look at covenant response. And therein, as we look at covenant response, we are going to look at how the full covenant story of what God has done through sending his son—how it is displayed in the Advent story. And we'll be looking at the confessions of our church. And then in January we will look at how—because the Gospel touches...What? All Things—we'll be looking in January at how the Gospel touches on our vocation, regardless of what that vocation may be. And then beginning after January we will look for the remainder of the year at the Gospel of Mark. So this is where we're going.

What is the gospel? The Gospel is God having a covenant promise with the cosmos. So it's big,

because the Gospel is big. And it means to take us to a far bigger understanding, a deeper understanding, of the love of Jesus and the love of God the Father and the work of His Holy Spirit. So that's the introduction.

But let's look together, then, at the beginning. You'll see the passages that we'll look at this morning: Genesis 1:1-2 and following. Hear now God's word.

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

[Genesis 1:27-2:3]

²⁷So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ²⁹And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food." ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

^{2:1}Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ²And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Then Genesis 3:15:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."

Let's pray. Now, Father, we ask that you would bless the preaching of your word as we look at it through the lens of covenant, through what is the gospel. Lord, help us to gain a greater understanding of who you are and what you have done. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So as we think about this idea of covenant, a couple of things need to be established. In Hebrew the word covenant is *berith*; in Greek it's diathéké. But the word *berith* in Hebrew is not mentioned in anything that I just read to you. The question is this: What, then, is the covenant.

If the covenant is a means through which we view the gospel, then, what is the covenant. And there I want you to see it as a key **Theme**. The covenant and God's covenant-making purposes is a key through which you can unlock not only the Gospel, but you can unlock all the great themes of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. But specifically, were we to define what is a covenant, there are probably many definitions that we could use. I want to borrow from a professor from my seminary, Michael Williams, in his book, *Far As the Curse Is Found*—he entitled his book after “Joy to the World,” Isaac Watts's hymn, that indeed, God's grace seeks us out as far as the curse is found.

We understand covenant in this way. It is simply the Bible's way of talking about relationship. Simply put, the covenant becomes a way in which God reveals to us who he is and magnifies his grace specifically through relationship. And while the word *berith* or covenant doesn't appear in the first two chapters of Genesis, covenant is still present. Because if anything one could say about Genesis 1 and 2, it is about relationship--God's relationship with all that he has created.

But to go a little bit deeper into the sauce, if we're to understand covenant, what is it specifically? How do we know we're looking at a covenant relationship? Well, this is important, so if you have your pens, please take them out and write these down. A covenant—and we realize this, that the idea of covenant is far beyond just how the Bible understands it. It was used as a common way of establishing relationships throughout the Middle East and even to the Far East. And so we understand the basic components of a covenant relationship as follows.

Number one it always includes a preamble. And here at the beginning of Genesis 1 it states clearly: “In the beginning, God. . .” The preamble is ‘God has created all things.’ And we understand that God has created all things, not because there was a bunch of broken stuff all over the universe and he gathered it together and cobbled it together out of chaos and brought something into order. Rather, it is that God has created all things from nothing. “The earth,” it says, “was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” God has created the entire cosmos from nothing by the word of his power. It is not a story of his beginning. It is the story of the world and the cosmos's beginning. The preamble we see at the beginning: Who has authority? Who has sovereignty? The Lord God. Yahweh.

Secondly, not only does it have a preamble, it has with it a senior and a junior. It has two partners in the relationship. And here we can see God actually has a covenant with creation itself. Why? Because he brought all things into created order. He names them. He also says what they are for: their purpose, their end. Indeed, the Bible goes into great length and great pains to demonstrate that it isn't just that God is the great clockmaker, an intelligent designer who designed it and then stepped away. Rather, there is a relationship going on between God and that which he has created. We hear it among the many Psalms. But one Psalm—and we could just randomly put our fingers on the Psalms and find this, but I found one: Psalm 98:7. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the whole world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.” So as the Psalmist goes from the created things, which has a relationship to its creator, it calls out his glory. It sings for joy, simply by the water going down the rocks in a river or the leaves rustling

in the wind or the sun rising or the moon in its rotation. All of these things have been created by God. God is the one who has created, and the glory of creation reflects back his glory. There is a relationship.

But as well we see it in the creation of man and woman, that there is God who has created man and woman in his image, in the image of the Triune God. And there are—we can stay—there are clear boundaries, there's a clear understanding that there is a relationship between God and man. There are responsibilities, there are obligations, and there are commands. As we hear of it we know that God gave the command to Adam and Eve that they were to enjoy all the fruit, all that was for them in the garden, but they were not to eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There are clear boundaries in the relationship; there are obligations and responsibilities.

So there's a preamble. There is a partnership between a greater and a lesser. The third thing that describes a covenant is that there is a mediator. There is a mediator that represents the one who establishes the relationship and everything else. Here Adam and Eve were to function as mediators of God's glory, God's sovereignty, God's creative power, God's beauty. And they were to mediate that to all creation. That was a part of their responsibility, part of their obligations.

But then fourthly there are blessings and there are curses. Said this way: Do this and you live; but you do this and you will surely die.

So a covenant has a preamble. It has partners: a greater and a lesser. There is a mediator of the covenant. And there are blessings and curses that outline the stipulations of the relationship.

So why was this important in establishing? Because remember, Genesis is prehistory. Moses, its author, is way in the future. Waaay in the future. And he's speaking to God's people, Israel, who have just been led out of slavery in Egypt, and they've been called to worship the Triune God, the One God. And there Moses—according to God's stipulation to him as a mediator between God and Israel—he was to tell them of who he was. And so Moses goes to great lengths to tell: Why is Israel so special to God? Why do they have an obligation to worship God? Why has God chosen them? What is the purpose for their living in the world? And so he goes back and he tells the story. And he's telling them that God's covenant with Israel is not new. It goes all the way back to creation. And he gives to us—though he never mentions the word covenant—he describes what God has with Israel, God has had with creation, and there's a back story to why Israel is experiencing what its experiencing. And so Moses tells the story and writes the story of Genesis.

And he means for us to be able to see that God's desire has always been to establish a relationship. There's a reason why we read the first part of Genesis and a little bit farther in the first chapter, because, again, it maintains God's relationship with the created order. And that is meant to be a telescope. It's meant to be a road sign to tell us yes, God cares about the redemption of human souls, but he has a relationship also with creation. He means to restore—What? [All Things.] (Just checking. Are you still awake? Stick with me. We're going there, I promise.) What does he have a relationship with? All Things. I'm going to drive that into your

hearts and your skulls, and you're going to dislike me by the end of the series. The reason for that is God has a purpose beyond just my salvation and Israel's salvation. God is doing something today in the world that is beyond any one person or any one group of people. He is about restoring all things. And we look in the hope to that restoration. But the way to understand it is through the pathway, through the lens of covenant.

But as you saw—we read in Genesis 3:15—there's obviously. . . There's a problem, a really big problem. And that problem is that Adam and Eve, though given all that they had—in perfect relationship with the Father, in perfect relationship with the created order—simply thought and chose to believe that somehow God was pulling a fast one over them. And they believed the serpent. They believed the temptation of the evil one. He said, *God simply doesn't want you to be like him*. And so what began there—illustrated in eating of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—what's happening there is man is saying, *You're not sovereign. I am*. And in so doing, sin entered the world.

But more than sin. It's all of sin's consequences. Sin is a violation of the relationship that Adam and Eve had with God the Father. They broke the covenant relationship. Therefore God understands, through the relationship of covenants, there are covenant breakers and there are covenant keepers. They were to keep the covenant, but failed to do so. Adam and Eve failed as mediators of God's glory for the creation. And as mediators, they fell. As our first parents, they fell. Therefore human nature has utterly fallen into sin and all the brokenness that sin causes. And that is the way in which we can view the world today. That regardless of the motivations of the bombings in New York City last night or the stabbings in Minnesota or all the various other crimes that we're greeted with every day, it is a picture, first and foremost, at the heart of every human being: a desire to say, *I don't want you as my sovereign. I'll do this*. And actions flow from that.

Please remember we are not sinners because of simply the fact that we sin. We sin, first and foremost, because we're sinners. What comes first is a leaving of the relationship, and from that flows all the actions of sin. (I almost really messed that up. Some of you know that. You saw that look in my eye.) But it's true. Some believe that the reason why we're sinners is because we first committed sin. The truth is, as those who have fallen from our first parents, we are sinners, first and foremost, and from that flows our actions. That is the problem of Genesis 3.

And there God brings about his wrath and holy judgment. But therein lies the beauty of the covenant. It would be in God's perfect righteousness to say I'm done with this relationship. But the beauty of the covenant, a beauty of what is the Gospel, is that in Genesis 3 we hear of God's justice and his wrath and his holiness against sin in judging it. He judges Adam, he judges Eve, he judges Satan himself. But in so doing we hear and see God's wrath—as one writer says—turn to grace. And there we see 3:15. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” What is being referred to here is that God is not done with covenant relationship, but rather, it now takes a very different, if you will, expression. Now it is a covenant, not of creation—it is a covenant of grace. And here God promises. . . God promises himself. That despite the painful reality of sin and its brokenness that it has caused in relationship with him,

he will go as far as the curse is found, according to his promise, to bring restoration of relationship between man and woman and God who created them. God's revelation of His covenant promise demonstrates the degree to which he is willing to go to bring about redemption, reconciliation, and restoration.

So when God says this, he says this first. He says I'll put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. What's interesting--when he says 'her offspring,' by the way, it's singular masculine. Meaning it's pointing to something in the future, but not just a thing, not a people—it's pointing to a person. And that person, through the gradual revelation of God's covenant, would be seen in Jesus Christ, who'd be the seed of the woman as the ultimate offspring. This would be the one to whom God would point here in Genesis 3:15.

But notice what it says: When he comes, he shall bruise your head. Here he's speaking directly to the evil one. And when he says, "He shall bruise your head," the word 'bruise' can also be translated, "He will crush your head," meaning he will destroy your power. Satan's power is sin and death, and Jesus would come on the cross and begin to lay that first blow. But on the third day, in which he was raised from the dead, Jesus ultimately demonstrates how the head of the serpent, the head of Satan himself, is crushed—meaning his power with death and sin is done. It has been conquered. It doesn't mean it's been fully realized in every way, but the death blow has been given. But it says, "You shall bruise his heel." It will mean that he, Jesus, will suffer.

So in covenant terms it means that God. . . This, if you will, is the preamble. This is what I'm going to do. He establishes the relationship: I will redeem you. He gives the ramifications or the boundaries: they will be through the seed of the woman. And he also talks about the mediator: it will be him who will bruise and crush the head of the evil one, even though his heel will be bruised.

But there will be blessings. The blessings are, as they are progressively revealed—ultimately as we heard earlier this morning in 1 Timothy—that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The blessing is: Do you trust in the Lord Jesus? He has died for you. And if you trust in him by faith, blessing and reconciliation begins to break out. But it's more than that. That when God redeemed Israel and when he redeems a human heart to himself, it does not stop there. It flows through you and through the Church of Jesus Christ to bring about God's glory in the act of restoration and redemption in the world. It is a very, very big gospel.

We come this morning to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is a way in which we can look together at how God demonstrates again and again his covenant promise to redeem, his covenant promise and desire for a relationship, and over and over again to point us to the mediator and again to demonstrate for us the depths to which he wants to show you his love.

I heard a song yesterday through Josh Garrels. It's a song called "Farther Along." Pastor P.D. was sharing this with me. And I was captivated by the final two verses of the song, which I could not more highly recommend. He says this. He says:

Still I get hard pressed on every side
Between the rock and a compromise

Like the truth and a pack of lies fightin' for my soul
And I've got no place left to go
Cause I got changed by what I've been shown
More glory than the world has known
Keeps me ramblin' on

Skipping like a calf loosed from its stall
I'm free to love once and for all
And even when I fall, I'll get back up
For the joy that overflows my cup
Heaven filled me with more than enough
Broke down my levees and my bluffs
Let the flood wash me

And one day when the sky rolls back on us
Some rejoice and the others fuss
Cause every knee must bow and tongue confess
That the Son of God is forever blessed
His is the kingdom, we're the guests
So put your voice up to the test
Sing Lord, come soon

The history of the world is the story of the Gospel. The story of the Gospel is through the covenant that God has established in relationship with us. We'll be looking at this through various lenses in all of its beauty and glory. His purpose is to bring about restoration through redemption. And when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are acknowledging that we need this bread and this juice to point us to the Ultimate Mediator of the best relationship we can ever imagine. We have not yet seen all the fruit that is to come from this covenant. It is yet to come, which is why Josh Garrel says, "And one day when the sky rolls back on us," and when it does, we will see. We will see him and he will see us. We will see all of his covenant purposes in all of their glory, but indeed, the glory will be to his name. May the Lord enrich our understanding of the Gospel. May he draw us all deeper into relationship with him, and may we become instruments in his hands to make known the grace and love of this covenant to all who will hear.

Let's pray. Now, Lord, we ask that you would prepare us for this supper, to feed us as guests at the table of the King. Lord, we thank you for the covenant relationship which you have established with your creation, which you have particularly established with us in the covenant of grace. Now, Lord, we pray as we eat of this bread as we drink of this cup, we will be able to rejoice as those who can say you have invited us who were once far off, who were once your enemies, to have a seat at the table. And we thank you because you are the one who has invited us. You are the one who sustains us, because you are the covenant making, covenant keeping, covenant completing God. We thank you and praise you. And in the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.