

Covenant: God's gracious promise

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[0 : 00] lived in perfect harmony. But what began as blessing has ended in curse. God the loving creator had given to Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman, all that they ever needed. It was all theirs to enjoy and delight in. Here I'm going to stop because, thanks Connor, you've reminded me. I've got little notes here as well.

So keep your Bibles open at Genesis. Take two. We'll start again. It was all so beautiful.

Everyone and everything lived in perfect harmony. But what began as blessing has ended in curse. God the loving ruler and creator had given to Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman, all that they ever needed. It was all theirs to enjoy and delight in. And all they had to do was obey. Look at chapter 2 verse 16. And the Lord God commanded the man, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For when you eat of it, you will surely die. But like us, they were not content with what they had been given. They wanted it all. They wanted to be like God. And so they listened to Satan and his lies. Chapter 3 verse 4. You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman.

For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. And with that desire driven from their hearts to be like God, they reached out and they ate the fruit. And at that very moment of rebellion against God, everything broke. The blessing turned to curse. Where the world was once teeming with life, there was now the stench of death.

Where man and woman once enjoyed God, there was now a fear of God. Where they walked with their creator in openness, they now ran and hid in shame. Rather than enjoying the blessing of God, they now experienced the curse of God. Chapter 3 verse 23. So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed him on the east side of the garden of the garden of Eden and cherubim with there with a flaming sword, flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. And that separation, that intimacy that they had is now been separated. And it's what the world and we all experience today. We are cut off from the source of all love and life with the fearful expectation of facing God's judgment and eternal and living death. All because, like Adam, we want to live as if we are God, making up the rules for our own lives, deciding what is good and evil. Now the awful truth is, we can do nothing about it. We cannot undo what we have broken.

[4 : 29] Of course, we've tried to fix it, but history proves that we've done very little to make things better. We could say the world has just gotten worse. The reality is, when we are the problem, we can't be the solution. So what are we going to do about it?

Well, the story of the Bible is not about what we can do, but it's all about what God does for us. Not what we do, but what God does. Not because we deserve it or earn it, but because of God's incredible and amazing grace. I have a definition here that I think works very well. God's grace is God's independent decision to treat rebels like us in kindness. And we've already seen glimpses of his grace at work at the very beginning of the story. So have a look at chapter four. Cain was Adam and Eve's first son. But look what we read in verse eight of chapter four. Now Cain said to his brother Abel, let's go out to the field. And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother

Abel and killed him. Now look at how God responds in verse 13. God said to the Lord, my punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land and I will be hidden from your presence.

I will be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me. But the Lord said to him, not so. If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over. Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. You see, in an act of grace, he is protected.

God does not treat him as he deserves. We see the same again if we look on in chapter five. Here we have this history of the human race. And because we've all rebelled, we all die. So look at how the theme runs. Verse five, altogether Adam lived 930 years and then he died. Verse eight, Seth lived 912 years and then he died. Verse 11, Enosh lived 905 years and then he died. And look at the very end of the section, verse 31. Altogether Lamech lived 770 years and then he died. And on and on it goes, it's telling us that the tragic fate of every human being is this death. But in the middle of the story or in the middle of this history of death, we see God's act of grace. Look in the middle of chapter five, verse 23. And here we read about Enoch. And what do we read there? Verse 23, altogether Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God. Then he was no more because God took him away. Do you see right in the middle of death, Enoch does not die. God in his grace spares Enoch the pain of death so he might live with God. Even when humans are at their worst, God acts in grace. Look at chapter six, verse five. This is the lead up to the flood and to the story of Noah and the ark. But read verse five, the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all of the time. And the Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, I will wipe mankind from whom I have created from the face of the earth. Now let's remember as God gives this description of this broken world,

[8 : 51] Adam is also part of that broken order. He's included in verses five and six. But look how God responds.

Verse eight, but Noah found favor or the word there is Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. In other words, God in his goodness treated Noah with kindness. Noah, who was a rebel, received God's grace. And we know that Noah and his family were saved as if God rebooted and started creation again, another start, another beginning by his grace. So here is our God who independently decides to treat rebels like us in kindness. And it's God's desire and his plan and his longing to show this grace, not just to one or two individuals, but that the whole world and every nation and every race would come to experience his amazing grace. And the way that God was going to do it was through a covenant, a promise.

A covenant is like a legal contract. It's a promise between two people or two parties. A marriage is a very good example of this. So when two people get married, they enter into a covenant relationship. This lifelong commitment to love one another, to be faithful and loyal to one another and not to leave each other.

So we had a wedding recently of Sam and Yelena. When they got married, they made their vows or their promises and they gave rings to each other as a sign of that covenant. It's a symbol of their binding agreement to one another. And in a sense, they are saying, I'll never leave you. I'll be committed to you.

I'll be faithful. I'll be loyal. Now it was through a covenant, through a promise that God would show his grace to the world. God saying, I am going to be faithful to you, loyal, committed. I will not leave you.

[11 : 09] You will be my bride. You will be mine. And that covenant was made with a man called Abraham. Now there's three things we need to know about this promise, this covenant that God would make.

Have a look at chapter 12. The first thing we need to know is that it is God's gracious intervention.

Genesis chapter 12, verse 1. The Lord said to Abraham, we know that his name was later changed to Abraham, so we'll just use that name. We won't get confused. So the Lord said to Abraham, leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. But well, who was this character? Where did he come from? Well, the Bible tells us a little bit later on that Abraham was an idol worshipper.

He didn't know or worship the true creator God. He wasn't anybody special. He wasn't somebody who was living a particularly good life that God looks down and goes, hey, he's doing very well. I think I'll speak to him. No, it's kind of out of the blue. There's nothing special about Abraham, but yet God reaches down and chooses him. This is an act of intervening grace in the life of one man.

And having intervened into his life, God makes this amazing promise, verse 2. He says, I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

[12 : 53] I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. It's hard to miss it. Primarily, this is a promise that God is going to bring blessing. Abraham is going to be blessed. But more importantly, look at the end of verse 3 again.

All peoples on earth, every tribe, tongue, and language will be blessed through you. Now let's remember, at this point in God's story, the world is experiencing this terrible curse.

The world experiences death and pain and suffering. Men and women are cut off from God, the source of all life and love. But all of that is going to change. God has not given up on the world or the people he has made. He is graciously going to intervene, and he promises to bring blessing instead of curse. And so someone from the line of Abraham, somebody from his family in years to come, is going to bring this blessing that would reach all peoples on earth, and nobody would be excluded.

That is God's intervening grace. But we also need to see that there is a binding obligation on our part.

You see, when God made his promise to Abraham, well, it was dependent on Abraham having children. Through a descendant of Abraham, the world would be blessed.

[14 : 36] The problem is that Abraham and his wife Sarah are very old, and they don't have any children. And without a child, the promise of blessing is not going to continue. So God reminds them again of his promise to bless.

So chapter 17, verse 3, he repeats the promise to him again. Verse 3, Abraham fell down, and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abraham. Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful.

I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

And this whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien. I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you. And I will be their God.

[15 : 50] It echoes out of Eden, isn't it? Where God was with his people and he says, Adam and Eve, I'm going to be your God. And he's promising again to Abraham, I'm going to restore all of that for the whole world.

God has not given up. He will graciously see that blessing will come. But you see, in these promises, God is not just committed to Abraham.

Abraham now in turn must be committed to God. In response, Abraham must make promises to God himself. Abraham has a binding obligation to obey God in everything so that he will experience God's blessing.

So chapter 17, verse 9, Then God said to Abraham, As for you, you must keep my covenant. You've got to keep your side of the bargain.

You and your descendants after you for the generations to come. And this is the covenant with you and with your descendants after you. The covenant that you are to keep.

[16 : 58] Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

Rather than exchange rings, which is a whole lot less painful, they're given a mark. The foreskin of the penis would be cut off.

It was a daily reminder of their commitment to the covenant. In the most natural act of a man, going for a wee, or for the most intimate moment with your wife, you could not escape the fact of your binding obligation that you must obey God.

So now it's very clear that to obey God, if you want to experience the blessings of God, you must obey God.

And if you disobey, if you break the covenant, then the blessing will stop. The problem is, so far in the story, men and women like you and I have a very poor record of being faithful and loyal to God.

[18 : 17] So the question remains, what's going to happen if Abraham fails to keep his side of the covenant? God will be committed, but what happens if Abraham isn't committed?

Well, here's the third part of the covenant that we must understand. God's gracious substitution. And for this, we need to go back to Genesis 15.

You see, God has been reminding Abraham of his promise. And now Abraham wants this confirmation that God is going to keep his promise.

So chapter 15, verse 8. Abraham says, O sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? How do I know I'm going to get the land?

How do I know this blessing from you is going to come? Verse 9, So the Lord said to him, bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

[19 : 31] Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other. The birds, however, he did not cut in half.

Now what a strange thing to be doing. Now picture the scene here. On either side is half a heifer, half a goat and half a ram.

And on the other side is the other half of the heifer, goat and ram. And two birds facing each other. And let's remember, Abraham, well, he couldn't just go down to Tesco's or his local butcher and get them all nice, nicely pre-prepared and pre-wrapped and all nice and clean.

No, he had to slaughter those animals there himself. So what we have, if you can picture this scene, is bits of meat on either side and in the middle is this bloody mess.

But what's it all for? What's it all about? Well, have a look at verse 12. As the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep and thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

[20 : 50] Verse 17. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham. You see, when we enter into a contract, what we normally do is sign a piece of paper.

We put our signature to it. Which usually means that if you break the contract, there's a penalty or a fee that you must pay. We have it with our bills, with electricity and gas.

You sign a contract and if you break that contract or leave early, then there's a cost to pay for it. Well, in these times, what they often did was they would cut an animal in half and place them opposite each other.

This was part of the contract. Then the two people who entered into the contract would walk between the cut-up animal. And in doing this, they were saying, may it be done to us if either of us break the covenant?

[22 : 05] In other words, if I break my side of the contract, may I be cut up or punished like this animal? But did you notice what happens in Abraham's vision?

Look again at verse 17. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

You see, this fire pot, this blazing torch that we see in the vision, represents the presence of God. Whenever we see fire, particularly in the Old Testament, it's a sign that God has showed up.

You know the story of Moses in the burning bush. God is there. You know the story of the fiery cloud. God is there. And so God shows up in this vision.

But it's not Abraham and God who walk through. It's just God by Himself. God alone walks through this bloody mess by Himself in between these two animals.

[23 : 21] And in this vision, God is saying to Abraham, Abraham, I will take responsibility. May it be done to me if either of us breaks the covenant.

I will take the blame if you fail to keep the promises. I will step in for you. I will be cut up for you. I will be the substitute for you.

I will take the blame if you disobey. What an amazing act of grace. It doesn't seem right.

It seems impossible. But that is the kind of God that we have. Now, it doesn't take long for us to discover as we read on in the story that we just see how man's failure heightens and how God's grace has to intervene time and time again taking the blame for man's rebellion.

You see, the rest of the story in Genesis from chapter 12 through is all about Abraham's family. They have Isaac. Isaac has Jacob and Esau.

[24 : 36] Jacob has his 12 sons which leads to the nation of Israel. And this is the family which is supposed to bring God's blessing to the world. They are to be conduits of God's grace to all the nations.

But when we follow this story and read about them, they're a definition of failure. Read the story for yourself in chapters 12 to 50. It's a catalogue of deception and betrayal.

Scheming and stealing and murder. This family of blessing is a complete and utter mess. They only add to the world's brokenness.

They don't do anything to make it better. At every point in their generations, this family fails. But the amazing thing is that God perseveres with them.

He does not give up. With each new generation, He renews His promise to bless. It's as if He drags this family kicking and screaming through the story.

[25 : 41] Time after time, He displays His grace because He's made a promise. He says, I'm going to bless you and I will take the blame for your ongoing failure. They are here. Reluctant as they are, God takes them through.

But this is not just a God of history away back then. This is our God today. He does not give up on me and He does not give up on you.

He perseveres with our rebellion. In grace, He drags us kicking and screaming to a place of blessing.

You see, the story of the Bible is about a God who is determined to bless us. He will not give up.

After hundreds of years of dealing with the world's ongoing failure and we'll be looking at the story of this failure in the weeks to come, God into the midst of it speaks of a new promise, a new covenant.

[26 : 57] Have a look at Jeremiah chapter 31. Almost in the middle of your Bible. Jeremiah chapter 31. So this comes at the end of a people, a family and a nation who have just spiraled downward into decay and disorder and failure and into the midst of this, God yet again speaks His promise.

And look what He says, Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 31. The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, with the house of Judah.

Verse 33. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they will be my people.

End of verse 34. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. How can God do that?

How can God change this catalogue and this history of rebellious hearts? How can He do it? How can He just wipe out our sins and failures?

[28 : 34] Just like that. Well, just as He had made that promise to Abraham that one from His family, a descendant of Abraham would come and would bring blessing to the world and to the nations.

And that person was Jesus Christ. He comes to bring this new covenant, one that will deal with our failures once and for all.

And we see that take place in Matthew chapter 26. Have a look in Matthew chapter 26. Here Jesus is nearing His own death.

It's the Lord's Supper. They're going to share in this meal together. And the people who are with Him in that meal are people who will betray Him.

People who will deny Him. People who are going to mess up. People who have been invited into this relationship, this covenant relationship with Him.

[29 : 49] And listen to these words as Jesus speaks to these failing disciples. People like you and me. Verse 26. While they were eating, Jesus took bread.

Picture it. Okay? This is something visual. He took bread. He gave thanks. And He broke it. And He gave it to His disciples saying, take and eat.

This is my body. And then He took the cup. And He gave thanks and He offered it to them saying, drink from it, all of you.

This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins. You see, Jesus is talking about His own death to come.

So Jesus is saying to us in these words, may it be done to me if I break the covenant or if you break the covenant.

[30 : 55] Remember Abraham's vision back in Genesis 15. Just as God had promised in that vision to walk through the bloody mess alone, so Jesus comes, the God-man, and He says, I will walk to the cross alone.

His body would be torn in two. His blood would be poured out on the cross. And as Jesus hangs and suffers, He is saying, I will take the blame when you fail to keep the covenant.

I will be cut up for you. I will be the substitute for you. I will take the blame for you when you disobey. And so no longer do we have to run and hide like Adam did back in the garden.

No longer do we have to try and cover up with our own performance, our own mess. Instead, we now run to Jesus in faith where we discover the true blessing of God, that new covenant where He gives us a new heart to be able to live God's way, where we receive the forgiveness of all of our sins.

And just as Adam and Eve walked in complete openness with God, so we can now enjoy life with Him. And just like God intervened into the life of Abraham, so God by His grace has intervened in our lives.

[32 : 29] and in response, Abraham left his old life behind. He turned his back on his old way. In repentance, he turned away from his life of sin.

He didn't go back there. Instead, he stepped out in faith. And so the invitation for us is to turn our back once and for all and step out with Christ on a new journey.

a life where we can enjoy the source of all love and life. A God who responds in grace and mercy and compassion.

A God who promised us from the very beginning you will receive blessing and not curse. What amazing grace.

Let's pray together. anotherunoñ R word re peace and