

My Covenant with You

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- [0 : 00] Do you ever find yourself looking around, maybe at things in your life, maybe at the world we live in and just wondering in your heart, God, where are you in all of this?
- Maybe it's a prayer that you've been praying, you've been asking God for something and the answer hasn't seemed to come yet. Where are you, God?
- Why have you not answered my prayer? Maybe it's with a big decision that you've been asking for wisdom for and yet there doesn't seem to be a clear direction.
- Maybe it's with some of the situations in your family or some of the things that we see in our world today. We know that the Lord has promised to return and yet it's been 2,000 years since that promise was made.
- Where are you, Lord? How long will it be? I think we've all felt that at one time or another.
- [1 : 30] This is the kind of feeling that we find Abraham with this morning as we continue his story. If you have your Bible with you, please open it to Genesis chapter 15.
- Genesis chapter 15. Last Sunday we heard about how Abraham and his nephew Lot went their separate ways. Abraham stayed in the promised land.
- Lot went to pitch his tent near Sodom. And not long after he did, war broke out. Five regional kings against four.
- And unfortunately for Lot, he was on the losing side. He was actually captured and his possessions, all of it and him, were taken away as plunder.
- Abraham being the wonderful uncle that he is, when he hears about this, he goes after Lot. He rallies the troops, so to speak. He gets the 318 trained men in his household, servants, ready for battle.
- [2 : 40] And they go out on this rescue mission. And in the middle of the night, they strike hard from two different directions. They route the enemy. They rescue Lot.
- They bring back all the people that had been captured and their possessions and return them to the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and that area. It seems like everything's going well.
- Abraham ends up playing the role of hero. And it's after this that we come to this chapter this morning where we find Abraham perhaps wrestling, wondering where God is in all of this.
- verse 1. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield.
- Your reward will be very great. We'll get to Abraham in a moment and how he's feeling, but let's just take a second to look at what the Lord has said here.
- [3 : 46] Again, the Lord appears to Abraham and this is a wonderful moment whenever it happens to have the creator of the universe appear to you and speak to you.
- And what does he say? He says, Do not be afraid, Abraham. We don't know why he's afraid. Is it because of the awesome presence of the Lord in this moment?

Or is it maybe because he might have made some new enemies in this recent rescue mission? We're not sure, but either way, the Lord comforts him.

He knows how Abraham is feeling and he gives him assurance. You don't need to be afraid. I am your shield. I will protect you. If they want to touch you, Abraham, they're going to have to come through me first.

Don't be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward will be very great. It's at this last phrase.

[4 : 52] Now there's some translation question here. Is it I am your very great reward or is it your reward will be very great? But I think the next verse kind of tips the balance towards one.

Let's just read it in verse two. But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?

And Abraham said, You have given me no children. So a servant in my household will be my heir. The Lord says, Your reward will be very great.

And Abraham says, in response to reward, What can you give me? I'm childless. Literally, I am ongoing childless.

I remain childless. The first thing that we notice here is that Abraham is respectful in how he expresses this.

[6 : 01] He says, Sovereign Lord or Lord Yahweh. A term of great reverence. We also notice that he's very honest about what his situation is and what he sees.

This isn't the first time that the Lord has made big promises to Abraham. And here the Lord is again making another big promise. Your reward will be very great.

And Abraham is honest. What can you give me? I don't have. You've said in the past the sense we get.

I'll give this land to your offspring and yet I have no offspring. Even today, I remain childless. You have given me no children. A servant in my household is lined up to be my heir.

As Abraham asked these questions, we're kind of wondering, what's his attitude here? Is he bitter? Is he disappointed?

[7 : 13] Is he angry? Is he expressing doubt and unbelief in God?

It may be difficult for some of us to go there because we so often see Abraham as this, he is the man of faith. The guy who always believed.

And yet, it kind of seems here from these questions that he didn't. Or that he was, at the very least, wrestling with it. I want to suggest that perhaps it's both.

In the words, and I can't help but think of these words when I read this, in the words of the man who spoke to Jesus about his child who was possessed with a demon.

I believe, Lord, but help me in my unbelief. There's evidence of both here from Abraham. First of all, we notice that he's respectful.

[8 : 20] We notice that he's even raised the issue of the heir, of this inheritance, probably because he took the Lord's word seriously the first time and the other times it's come.

And now, we also see evidence, though, that there's a wrestling to believe and to trust. I believe, Lord, but I still don't have a child.

You said you would give me offspring, and yet, I don't have any. You have not given me children. I think there's a little of both.

I believe, Lord, but help me in my unbelief. Now, I want to be clear here.

When we trust the Lord and take him out his word, it honors him. And when we don't, it doesn't honor him. Nevertheless, I think that we find ourself in this place that we see Abraham ourselves, where we kind of have both.

[9 : 40] I hear what you say in your word, Lord, and I look at my life, I look at the things around me, I look at it all, and I believe, but help me in my unbelief.

Where are you in this situation? Where are you? Where's your answer to this prayer that I've been praying? Where's this return that you've promised?

It's getting to be a long time since you made the promise. I don't want to say that it's okay to doubt because I don't think that's what Abraham is showing us here.

But I do want to say that it's, I think we see from Abraham that it's okay to be honest with the Lord about what we see, what we feel. and even to ever so respectfully and humbly say to the Lord, this is what you've promised and yet this is what I see, this is what I feel.

Would you help me with my unbelief? I'm trying to take your word for what you said, but it's not easy.

[10 : 58] How does the Lord respond to this? Verse four, then the word of the Lord came to him.

This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. The Lord took him outside and said, look up at the sky and count the stars.

If indeed you can count them, so shall your offspring be. The first thing that we notice is that the Lord doesn't rebuke him or give him a slap on the wrist for doubting.

In fact, he seems to do just the opposite. Abraham expresses this mixture of faith and yet wrestling to believe and have faith and the Lord helps him.

He gives him assurance. He gives him the promise yet again and he even gives it with more clarity and detail.

[12 : 12] He says, no, Eliezer of Damascus, this servant that's next in line to be your heir, he's not the one. You will have a son, your own flesh and blood, a son, a child.

That's where it's going to start, Abraham. That's where I'm going to start with keeping my promise to you and this is where it's going to end. He takes him outside.

Look up at the sky. Count the stars. I love the way the Lord says, if indeed you can count them. There's so many, there's so, it's so vast, it's beyond numbering to us as human beings.

This is where it's going to start, Abraham, with a son of your own flesh and blood and this is where it's going to end with your descendants beyond numbering. How does Abraham respond to this?

What does he say in response? We've kind of seen this little back and forth thing. The Lord speaks, Abraham speaks, then the Lord speaks and now what does Abraham have to say?

[13 : 26] In verse 6, the narrator of the story, Moses, kind of interjects and tells us what the response is.

You almost get this picture that Abraham is left speechless just staring up at the sky. If we end the story there, we wouldn't know what happened. And so, Moses kind of jumps in and says, now Abraham believed.

And the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. So here, Abraham is looking up at the sky. He's heard the promise again.

Even though he's wrestled with believing these things because of what he sees, in that moment, he believed.

He embraced that, yes, Lord, you will do this. this will come true. And the Lord credited it to him as righteousness and we'll come back to that.

[14 : 30] There's a sense too, in this particular verse, that it's not just describing how he responds in this moment as he stares up at the stars.

People who know more about the original language, they all see it here. maybe a better translation is now, Abraham had believed and the Lord had credited it to him as righteousness.

The sense of that is not just that this is how it is in this moment, but this is kind of how it's been right back to the beginning since the Lord first spoke to Abraham. Abraham had believed.

He took God at his word and trusted it. By and large, on the whole, doesn't mean that he never had wrestlings or doubts, but on the whole he believed and on the whole the Lord had credited it to him as righteousness.

We'll come back to that in a moment, but let's go on to verse 7 and see how this story continues to unfold. Verse 7, he also said to him, that is, the Lord also said to Abraham, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

[15 : 54] But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it? Here again, we see kind of a similar thing happening in verse 7.

He also said to him, there's this sense at which all of this kind of happened in one event. It was kind of mixed together and yet Moses is kind of separating out the different parts of the conversation.

Let's talk about the promise of the Son first and then let's talk about the promise of the land next. But it's all kind of together in one. And it's, again, it's similar to what's happened before.

The Lord said, I am the Lord. I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans and the reason I brought you out of there. My intention right from the start was to give you this land so that you could possess it.

And again, Abraham responds with this, I'm going to call it a mixture of faith and wrestling to have faith.

[16 : 59] He speaks respectfully, sovereign Lord, but then there's that question. how can I know that I will gain possession of it?

I hear what you say, Lord, and I believe, but help me in my unbelief because when I look at the land right now, what do I see? It's full of people.

It belongs to other people. They've laid claim to it. How will this happen? Give me assurance that you will do what you have promised. And the Lord, instead of saying, you shouldn't doubt me, just believe, what does the Lord do?

He gives him assurance. 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.

Abram 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.

[18 : 13] Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. We're going to skip down to verse 17. We'll come back to 12 in a minute. Verse 17, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces of the animals.

And then Moses tells us what's happening here in verse 18. He says, on that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. Now as we read that, it probably seems very strange to us.

We don't do anything like that in our day. Kind of disgusting, taking these animals, cutting them up, and then walking through the pieces.

I mean, what is that all about? Well, Abram asked for assurance. And so God is giving him assurance, but he's giving it to him according to the custom of the day.

This is how they made covenants back in ancient times. animals. They would take some animals, maybe one or more, cut them in half, they put the pieces on either side, and then they would walk through the pieces.

[19 : 38] Back then, they wanted to have a way to say, you can trust that I will keep my word. And this was how they did it. And essentially what they were saying as they did that was, if I don't keep my word to you, then may what happened to these animals happen to me.

It was essentially invoking a curse upon yourself, conditionally, if you fail to keep your word. If I don't keep my promise to you, may this happen to me.

And this kind of interpretation of it is best seen in Jeremiah, and apparently it was still being practiced as late as then. If I don't do what I've said that I will do, may God bring the curse of death upon me.

There's not really a nicer way to say it. It's a very grotesque kind of thing, but it's very rich in symbolism. And the Lord enters into this thing and does this thing in front of Abraham.

Now, there's a couple things I want to say about this whole thing. The first is it was common for two people to walk through the pieces together, especially if they both had an end of the deal to keep up.

[21 : 05] They would both walk through, and then if one of us breaks it, then may this happen to us kind of thing. But here we see that it's just the Lord who passes between the pieces.

And that happens in verse 17 when it says Abraham saw a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch. And those things probably have a significance to this ritual back in the day that's probably lost on us today.

But the sense is that the Lord chose to manifest himself, to reveal himself in this form. The invisible God showed himself in this way as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the pieces.

And Moses kind of confirms that in verse 18 where it says, on that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. It was God himself who passed through the pieces.

But Abraham didn't. And so this is signaling right here that these promises that I've made to you, I'm taking on myself the full weight of responsibility to see that they come to pass for you.

[22 : 23] There's no obligation for Abraham to do anything. Interesting. The second thing that I want to say about this ritual, did the Lord really have to do this for Abraham?

Did going through this ancient human ritual and making a covenant like this make it any more sure that the Lord would keep the promises that he had made?

My answer to that is no. The Lord intended to keep his promises when he made them and that was enough. And so in a sense we see here kind of the humble love of God, the kindness of God, that he is going to stoop down to Abraham's level and say it, demonstrate it in a way that Abraham understands, that is deeply meaningful to him as he goes through this ancient ritual.

people. This is God's way of saying in Abraham's language and tradition, I will go to the uttermost lengths to keep my promise to you.

Now I don't want to press this beyond what it's meant to say, but some people take issue with God kind of going through a ceremony like this. It's kind of a dark ceremony, cutting animals and stuff.

[24 : 08] Would God really do that? Would he invoke a curse upon himself, a curse of death? That just doesn't feel good, it doesn't feel right. But I just can't help but see the statement that comes out of this kind of a thing.

When you went through the pieces of the animal, you were essentially saying, may God's curse, the curse of death be upon me if I fail to keep my word to you.

Would God go that far to keep his word, to bless Abraham, to show kindness to Abraham?

I can't help but see and think of the words of Paul in Galatians 3, verse 13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

How? By becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.

[25 : 21] Not only would God say may I be cursed if I fail to keep my word for you, but he did fall under a curse.

Paul was talking about the Mosaic law and the curses that were attached to that, so it's somewhat different in its meaning, but the effect is still the same. yes, the Lord is saying, may I go to the uttermost lengths.

I will suffer the ultimate cost to keep my promise to you. See that picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, bearing the curse, the punishment of sin that we deserved.

yes, I will go to that length if necessary to keep my promise to you and to bless all the families of the earth.

I won't let anything, not even my own justice, stand in the way of the blessing that I have promised.

[26 : 39] there are some people that will say to you, the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New Testament or Jesus that we see in the New Testament.

But if you really look closely, it's not true. We see in this dark, ancient covenant ritual, the same kind of humble, stooped down to our level love.

As we see at the cross, as God goes through this dark and horrific moment, Jesus carrying this cross up to Calvary to die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. We see his humble love and grace just the same.

second thing I want to talk about here, I want to be very careful here because there are some people out there today who have kind of got this, I want to call it new, it's probably not, but it's very fresh, I'm just going to call it what it is, false teaching, in which they're saying things like, look, see, see what Abraham, what God did for Abraham here?

[28 : 14] He didn't actually endorse the cutting of the animals into pieces and all that stuff, he just, he just did it that way to demonstrate that in a language that Abraham would understand.

there's not really any significance to this ancient ritual beyond the symbolism. In the same way, there's not really any significance to the cross beyond the symbolism.

It's just God saying, I love you, in a way that our primitive ancestors, our barbaric ancestors could understand.

there's nothing, this is absolutely, it's deadly, is what it is.

It's stripping the cross of its power. It's a very dangerous way of looking at the scripture. Just because this human covenant, this covenant was a human covenant, doesn't mean that God didn't actually do it and mean it, that the covenant wasn't somehow significant.

[29 : 24] Yes, it was. God put himself into an ancient human tradition and bound himself there in a real sense so that for generations to come, people could look back on that and say, yes, God will keep his word.

We might find it disgusting that the animals were cut in two, but the Lord wasn't just doing this to pretend, to give Abraham a sense of who he is, the right idea, even though I completely disagree with this whole ritual here.

It's gross. It's disgusting. No, this covenant that God made with Abraham, even though it was a human custom, it was real and it was binding. If the Lord does something that we do, he does it in the way that we should do it, which in this case, in a covenant ceremony, means that he fully intends to keep his word and to be bound in that moment in history by what he said he would do.

Just because it's a human tradition, a human custom doesn't make it less significant that God did it. The fact that God entered into this human tradition and custom and made this covenant in this way infuses it with meaning.

It takes what is earthly and it makes it glorious. It redeems it. It purifies it. It increases the significance of it beyond what it would have meant to just two people doing it.

[31 : 08] For the rest of eternity, we're going to look back on this moment and say, yes, Lord, you made a covenant and you've kept the promise.

That covenant was made when he walked through the bloody pieces of animals and for the rest of eternity, we're going to look back in the same way on the cross.

God and yes, it actually did something. It had real weight and significance. It wasn't just a show to communicate the right idea.

It really did something. It secured forgiveness for us of our sins as horrific and barbaric as it was. We should sing.

We should wonder that God would humble himself and bring his glorious perfection down into our world, down into a human body in the person of Christ, down into some of our customs and traditions and lift those things up and make them glorious and serve his purposes.

[32 : 30] This is the covenant ceremony. In the midst of all this, we skipped over a few verses. God gives Abraham assurance in a different way. The covenant ceremony, that's the tangible thing.

That's the thing that he can see with his eyes. But God also gives him a few more words, a bit of an explanation as to how these promises will be kept to help him, to give him assurance.

So what does he say? Verse 12, As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that for 400 years, for 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.

[33 : 41] In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. So not only does God give assurance visibly and tangibly through the covenant ceremony, but he actually gives an explanation to assure Abraham of how things are going to unfold.

And this is new. This is something Abraham hasn't heard yet. Abraham's received all these great promises, promises, and now the Lord gives some clarity.

These promises will come true. I will see to it, Abraham, but it's not maybe how you expected it to go. I mean, Abraham's got to have been wondering, do I just pitch my tent here and do we just keep growing and growing and eventually, what, the people that are already here just are going to leave?

How will this happen? The Lord gives some clarity. It's not going to be right away. It's actually going to be 400 years from now.

Four generations from now. And it's not going to be the way that maybe Abraham expected. It's actually going to involve your descendants going to another country where they're going to be mistreated and oppressed and enslaved.

[35 : 12] Don't worry, I'm not going to let the country that does that to them get away with it. Absolutely not. Justice will be done. But it's not until 400 years from now when they come out that your descendants will truly in a fuller sense possess this land.

Why? Why this way? There's only one reason given in this passage. church. There's probably more reasons that the Lord has.

One of the reasons in verse 16, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. Well, that's interesting. I'm going to give this land to you, Abraham.

I'm going to give it to your descendants, but if you're to just go around and start killing people here and taking the land from them, that would not be right. The Lord is just.

He is the judge. He sees that the punishment fits the crime and they're not going to be worthy of a punishment, deserving of a punishment like is going to happen when you come back in and conquer the land 400 years from now for another 400 years.

[36 : 34] Even here, we see the Lord's mercy and grace. They're sinners, yes. They deserve the same as all of us, yes.

But it wouldn't be right for you to just take this land from them now. The Lord is working to ensure that justice is done in the grand scheme of things. He's not just going to take this land and give it because he doesn't care about these people.

He cares about them. And they will have time in the meantime to listen to Abraham, the Lord's prophet who is among them, speak of the Lord.

They will have time to see him worship the Lord and hopefully respond to and repent and believe in him. So things have come clearer for Abraham.

The Lord has given him great promises. he has done his best to believe and yet he has struggled to believe at moments and he asked the Lord for assurance and God gives it to him.

[37 : 45] He gives it to him in very powerful and tangible and real ways and even yet with all this that he's now heard from the Lord there's still so much unknown.

and yet Abraham believes the Lord. That's the way we're meant to take verse six. Now Abraham had believed in response to all of this.

He trusted that the Lord would do this and maybe now he holds these promises with a little bit more of an open hand to let God be God, to let God direct the story according to what is truly best.

it doesn't always go the way that we expect or hope. Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

This is one of the most profound amazing statements in the whole book of Genesis. Abraham responded to God with faith that was kind of par for the course for him and what did God do?

[39 : 03] He credited that to him as righteousness. Think about that. If you credit something to someone it's because they don't have it already.

Implied in these words is that Abraham is not righteous. righteous. He is not right with God just like the rest of us. Just like the rest of the people in this larger story of the world.

And yet God is giving him something he doesn't have, a right standing with him. He's treating him as though he is right with himself.

not because he is, but simply because he believed. What is going on here?

What about divine justice? This is certainly wonderful for Abraham, an incredible mercy and gift. Those are questions that we're going to get to in October when we flip to the other side and go to Romans and look at what Paul had to say based on this to the church at Rome.

[40 : 26] And so where do we find Abraham at the end of all this? We find him lying in the field at night looking up into the sky and counting.

He believed. He took the Lord's word seriously and so there he is counting and then he loses count and he starts again and then he loses count again and he starts again and then he comes back a week later and realizes that the moon was up and now that it's down there's even more stars than there were before and he starts again and then he comes back in three months and realizes that there's a whole new set of stars and he starts again and when he finally gets tired of trying to do what he just simply can't is that one star two three is that whole galaxy he closes his eyes and he thinks to that moment where he saw the smoking fire pot and the blazing torch passing through the pieces Abraham believed he took the

Lord seriously and he's waiting to see how God will work all of this according to his plan and promise so what can we take from this what do we take for us today from this if Abraham were sitting right here with us today I have a feeling that the first thing he would say is don't look at me in this story I'm nothing look at the Lord look at what he did to me look at what he said to me look at his kindness look at how he treated me even though I didn't deserve it look at how he responded to my doubt and struggle to believe so graciously so humbly giving me assurance in a way that meant the world to me look at his kindness look at his goodness look at his justice even towards the

Amorites don't look at me I'm nothing see the glory of the Lord here is what I imagine Abraham would say if he were here with us this morning worship his name the true treasure in this story the true reward is not what he said he would give it's him it's this relationship that I have with him and all of this comes in the midst of Abraham's seemingly mixed feelings we too wrestle with faith with believing at times just like he did we live often in that place of I believe Lord but there's unbelief there too there's doubt and we see from

Abraham that we can bring those doubts to the Lord we can speak to him honestly about what's going on in our lives we should do so respectfully as he did and humbly and he is the kind of God that is gracious towards us and will give us assurance is there something in here that doesn't sit right with you ask him about it he will give us assurance he's the kind of God that gives his promise and then gives the same promise again and then gives it again and gives it again he knows the kind of people that we are he knows the way we struggle he opens our eyes just a little bit more at a time and leads us along in this amazing relationship of love what a wonderful God he is let's pray

[44 : 50] Lord we don't come to you with something in our hands to say look at how awesome we are what we have to give to you we come to you like Abraham did so often with mixed feelings with doubt with some faith yes but you're so gracious to us and we praise you for that we love you we ask that you would strengthen our faith that you would teach us to walk by faith like Abraham did and to take your word as the truth and live by it we thank you that through Christ you have not treated us as we deserve not Abraham and not us you've instead been gracious and given your blessing to us thank you it's in

Jesus name that we pray amen to hope thank you