

SERMON GUIDE

Genesis: The Covenant

Genesis 15:7-21



3.10.2024

SERMON NOTES:

I'm really giddy to get into this text today. This is one of those passages that you've possibly read before but missed how profound it is. It's one of those "huh, not sure what that's about" kind of passages, and we blow past the mind-blowing lesson and implication. Now check this out...my introduction is going to be longer today before I get to Genesis 15. And you'll see why once we get there. But by the time we get to Genesis 15, you are going to be in position to see and understand the beauty, majesty, and good news of this text.

One of the words used in the Bible and in talking about Christianity is "covenant." This is not a word widely used in our culture today for many things. But it is an important word. God establishes covenants. God operates by covenants. A covenant is made when God promises not to destroy the earth by flood again. And the sign of the covenant is the rainbow. Marriage is called a covenant in the book of Malachi. We have the Mosaic covenant (God gives the law) and the Davidic covenant (God promises an everlasting kingdom). There is the new covenant (or the covenant of grace) where God saves a people of every nation, tribe, and tongue through faith in Jesus. And there is the Abrahamic covenant (which we'll look at today). My point in this isn't to unpack everything about these covenants, but to highlight how prominent they are in Scripture, and how important it is that we understand the nature of a covenant.

I want you to understand that a covenant relationship is a combination of law and love, setting it apart from all other types of relationships. Law and love. Legal and personal. Our culture and society today don't really have a category for understanding a covenant relationship built upon both law and love. Modern society holds these two categories separate. So you have legal relationships and you have love/personal relationships.

A legal relationship is the kind of relationship you have with your mortgage company or your bank that has your car note or your employer. I do this, I get this. I show up to work and do what's expected, I get a paycheck. I pay my mortgage note, I continue to live in my house. I pay my car note, eventually I pay it off, then I own it. This is a legal relationship. It's a law relationship.

A love/personal relationship is the kind where we have mutual interests, hobbies, commitments, and choose to be around each other. In love relationships, there are affections involved. But often, in love relationships, we make it primarily about our individual happiness and personal fulfillment. And when that suffers or wanes, so does our commitment to the relationship. These are easier to walk away from than legal relationships.

Covenant relationships are different. It's a combination of both law and love. A covenant relationship is more loving than a mere legal relationship, yet it is also more binding and accountable than a mere personal relationship. It's a personal relationship made more loving and intimate because it is legal, through voluntary, mutual, binding promises and vows to be loving and to be faithful no matter what the circumstances. I want to show you the origins/basis for covenant relationship - which will bring the gospel to life for you.

We see covenant language described in Deuteronomy 29. Here in this passage, God renews the covenant He made with His people. The Lord is speaking to Moses and the people He rescued out of Egyptian slavery. Moses summons the people of Israel and reminds them of the covenant and God's faithfulness to them. He then goes on to remind them of the covenant (READ verses 10-18). I want you to notice the language of both law and love. Notice words like, "sworn covenant," "establish you," "promised you," and "swore." Other translations use the words like "sealing," "oath," and "confirm." This is the language of law. But right there in this you also see the language of love and personal relationship. In fact, you spot personal possessive pronouns throughout this: "the Lord your God," "His people," "your God," and "Lord our God." These phrases demonstrate an intimate relationship. Do you see law and love present?

Now here is another important component. Covenants have terms and conditions. A covenant is more than a contract, but it's certainly not less. If you meet the terms, there are rewards and blessings (verse 9). If you violate, there are penalties or curses (verse(s) 18, 20-21). You see that in the text we just read. This is what makes a contract valuable. It puts backbone in our commitment.

But understanding the covenant can be a challenge. Why?

Because how could the curses be true if God is a forgiving God?

But simultaneously...

How can the covenant be meaningful and binding if He just forgives?

This tension is found and felt throughout the pages of Scripture. Throughout the Old and New Testament, God is a Just Judge, He cannot wink at guilt or bless those who rebel against Him (*the curses of this book will settle upon him, the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven*). But also throughout the Old and New Testaments are statements from God like, "*I will never leave you,*" "*I will never give up on you,*" "*I will not forsake you,*" and "*I will always accept you.*"

Do you see the tension? This tension is present throughout the entire Bible. It forces a couple of questions for us to wrestle through:

- Will God cave and just accept whatever His people do? (the unconditional statements seem to suggest this) And if so, then how is God able to maintain His holiness and justice?

- Will God just give up on His people and cast them aside if they fail? (the conditional statements seem to suggest this) But if so, then what do we make about promises of His faithfulness and love?

Do you see the tension? How can God remain both holy (by punishing sin) and faithful (by never forsaking us or leaving us)? The tension raises a massively important question we must answer: **Are the blessings of God conditional or unconditional?**

The Bible seems to give (at first glance) contradictory answers (though there's no contradiction), which is why people often fall on one side or the other. Some will say, **"Yes, we are to obey, and be good, but in the end, God loves everybody."** This can get people into universalist positions or being very dismissive of sin. Others will say, **"Yes, God is very loving, but in the end, you have to do the right things (be good) or He will punish you (or withhold His love)."** This can put people in very legalistic positions where nobody is ever holy enough.

How do you resolve this?

The answer for how to resolve this is found by looking at when the covenant was established, which is what we see in our text today in Genesis 15.

Exegesis: Genesis 15 (Establishing the Covenant)

Remember vs 1-6 from last week. God promises Abram blessing, and Abram questions what it could be since he is still without a child. God restates His commitment to giving Abram a child. Then He shows Abram the stars and reminds him of how numerous his descendants will be. Then in vs 6, Abram believes God, and then God counts it to him as righteousness.

This is the basis of justification by faith. A right-standing with God comes by faith in the gospel. We trust in the finished work of Jesus for us, and we are counted as righteous before God. Now we pick up what happens next.

VS 7-8 -- 7 And he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." 8 But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

The LORD reminds Abram that He is the One that called him from his homeland to give him this land to possess (verse 7). But Abraham, who sees the land occupied, asks, "How am I to know this will be?" (verse 8). Now at this point, the Lord could have said, "Because I said so," and it honestly would have been enough. But the Lord does something stunning. He enters a covenant with Abraham about this promise. Abram asks how he can know that he'll really possess the land. What takes place next is incredible.

VS 9-11 -- 9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

The Lord has the animals cut in half and put in two rows (verses 9-11). There is a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove, and a young pigeon. Everything but the birds are cut in half and laid in rows (with an aisle in the middle). What did this mean? What is going on? When a greater person/a master wanted to make a covenant with a lesser person/servant, animals would be sacrificed and cut in two and formed into two rows with a walkway in the middle. The servant would then make the oath between the two rows and acted out the curses of the covenant.

So the picture is of the servant walking between them stating the agreement they are making. How was he acting out the curses? By making his oath in between the sacrificed animals, he was saying, “If I do not keep my covenant with you, may I be as these animals.” So here in verses 9-11, a covenant ceremony was unfolding. The servant walked through the aisle between these rows, never the lords/masters. So Abram does what he is told and awaits further instruction. He shewed the birds of prey away who were trying to take advantage of the sacrificed animals laying there.

VS 12-16 -- 12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

So Abram does what God says and waits. The sun begins to go down and Abram falls into a deep sleep. And it says a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Physical darkness covers the land. A fearful blackout. It's in this darkness that the LORD comes to Abram and speaks to him. He reveals what will happen to his descendants as slaves in Egypt. And tells him of the Exodus that will follow. The iniquity of the Amorites is not specifically pointing them out, but they represent all of the Canaanite tribes.

VS 17-21 --17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

Then darkness comes down, and God, through a smoking fiery pillar, passes through the pieces and makes the oath. God, not Abram, passes through. He promises blessing, and He promises to

die—that's the nature of the ceremony and covenant—if he doesn't keep up His oath. He promises to be torn apart like these animals.

Why didn't Abram have to walk through and make an oath? Why did God go through when it is supposed to be the servant? The answer is crucial to grasp: Because God was making the promise for both of them. God was saying, "I'll be torn to pieces if I don't keep my promise." But he was also saying, "I'll be torn to pieces if YOU don't." God was committing to be torn to pieces, not only if he didn't keep the covenant, but if we didn't.

That's what is taking place in Genesis 15. God establishes the covenant with Abram. He has made covenant promises to him that not only include land and descendants, but that through him, all peoples of the earth would be blessed. This covenant is ratified right here in this text.

Did God keep his covenant oath to Abram's descendants? Yes.

Did Abram and his descendants keep the covenant with God? No.

So what happened?

Many centuries after this covenant ceremony took place, in Jerusalem, on a hill called Calvary and Golgotha, the darkness of judgment would overtake the land again, just as it had done in Genesis 15. And there, God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, was torn to pieces because we broke the covenant. And there on that cross, God became both the Just and the Justifier of those who would put faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

So back to the question I posed earlier: are the blessings of God conditional or unconditional?

The answer is: BOTH. At the cross, Jesus meets the conditions of the law, so that the Father could love us unconditionally. At the cross, Jesus receives the curses of the covenant for our sin, so God does not give in and let sin go unaccounted for. At the cross, sin receives its due, but God also keeps His promise to bless, never forsake, not give up on us, always accept us.

All of this is on the basis of the finished work of Jesus. Do you see it? The Genesis 15 covenant fulfillment was always going to be through Jesus.

We get to have a relationship with God because of the beautiful combination of law and love found in the covenant. It's legal because we must have our sins forgiven. We must be justified before God. But it's loving. He doesn't merely justify us, but He invites us to know and walk with Him. This is the answer to the entire tension of the Bible.

We are the covenant people of God.

Our God makes the covenant, keeps it for us, and is torn to pieces on our behalf, fulfilling the law and extending His love.

LOOK BACK

- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you GROW in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you GO to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?

BUILD UP

- **REVIEW:**
 - Read **Genesis 15:7-21** and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
 - What big takeaways did you have from the teaching?
 - Additional Scripture:
 - John 1:17
 - Romans 7:12
 - John 3:16
 - Romans 5:8
 - 1 John 4:7
 - Genesis 9:11
 - Deuteronomy 29:10-18
 - Luke 22:20
 - Galatians 3:13-14
- **REFLECT:**
 - How is a Covenant relationship different from other relationships?
 - Discuss the aspects of a Covenant in some of the examples Erik mentioned.
 - Why were the animals cut in half as part of the process for a Covenant?
 - What is unique about the Covenant that God makes with Abram?
 - Are the blessings of God conditional or unconditional?
- **RESPOND:**
 - Do you find yourself falling into the law or love ditches of the Covenant?
- **MEDITATE:**
 - Galatians 3:13-14 -- Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

- **MEMORIZE:**

- Philippians 4:19 -- And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

SEND OUT

- **GROW:** How will you abide in Christ this week and grow in your love and understanding of Him?
- **GO:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story or the gospel?

- **PRAYER:**

- Pray over any request from your group members.
- Kids Ministry Assistant - **Jackie Cornett**
- Ministry - **Kids Ministry**
- **Pray for our long-term units on the field:**
 - The Wilsons
 - The Grays
 - The Starks
- **Pray for our mid-term sent ones on the field:**
 - Kaesi
 - Ethan & Dustin (May 16 - June 30)
- **Pray for our short-term teams:**
 - Central Asia Team #1 returning March 15
 - Southeast Asia Team #1 returning on March 17
 - Indonesia Team departing on April 27
 - London Team departing June 30
 - Southeast Asia Team #2 departing on June 15
 - Central Asia Team #2 departing on September 27
- **Pray for the lost - Unreached People Group (UPG):** Kabyle Berber in Belgium



- **Population in country:** 55,000

- **Global population:** 7,254,400
- **Christian Adherent:** 2.00%
- **Evangelical:** 1.5%
- **Primary Religion:** Islam
- **Primary Language:** Amazigh
- **Summary:** The Kabyle are an African Berber tribe mostly located primarily in Morocco, Tunisia, western Libya and the coastal mountain regions of northern Algeria. The Africans call this entire region of North Africa Maghrib. During the third century, the Romans named the people of the Maghrib "Berber," which means "barbarian." Some arrived in Belgium after World War II when there was a labor shortage. Others went as merchants, since Belgium was an important trading partner with North African countries.
- **Prayer Focus:** Many Kabyle are searching for answers beyond Muslim fundamentalism. Those in North Africa do not have the freedom to follow Christianity, but those in Belgium do. Although a number of them have responded to recent Christian programs produced in France, there are still many who remain unreached. Pray for a spiritual hunger among the Kabyle Berbers in Belgium, especially among their leaders. Pray for people who love Jesus to go to them with the gospel. Pray that Belgium would be a place where Kabyle Berbers experience a movement to Christ.
- Want to keep up with other Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>