

“THE LORD’S COVENANT OATH”

The events in this passage took place after Abram had accomplished a great victory. He had driven the alliance of Mesopotamian invaders out of the land of Canaan and rescued his nephew Lot. and after securing that military victory, Abram also won a great spiritual victory. He rejected the temptation to enrich himself by accepting the plunder that was offered to him by the king of Sodom. He avoided entangling himself with the wicked people of Sodom and gave all the credit for his victory to the Lord. This was a significant act on Abram’s part. It was a demonstration of his faith in the Lord. However, it is not very hard to see how he could have fallen into a state of fear and doubt after these events were over. How could he be sure that the armies he had driven out of Canaan would not simply gather reinforcements and return to wipe him out? Furthermore, how would the king of Sodom respond to Abram’s rejection of what he surely would have considered to be a generous offer? The people of Sodom were not the sort of folk who overlooked a perceived offense. And on top of that, Abram’s display of military prowess might cause them to see him as a threat against them as well. Abram had good reason to worry. This was the state he was in when our passage begins, when the Lord comes to him in a vision to reassure him and confirm the promises that he had already made to him. This passage is typically referred to as God’s covenant with Abram. It is part of the one overarching covenant of grace that is set forth across the pages of holy Scripture: the covenant by which God freely offers life and salvation to sinners, the covenant that reaches its fulfillment in Christ’s atoning work on our behalf. Tonight, I

want to point out three things that the covenant with Abraham can teach us about God's covenantal dealing with his people.

First, this passage shows us that God requires his covenant people to live by faith. As we already noted, Abram was afraid when God came to him in this vision. This explains why the Lord's first words to him were, "Fear not." In the face of Abram's concerns about his physical security, the Lord promised him that he would be his shield. God himself would be the shield that would defend him against all of his enemies. And on top of that, the Lord encouraged Abram by telling him that his reward would be very great. This term "reward" is often used to refer to the compensation that was due to those who had fought in a military campaign. Abram had just conducted a campaign against the invaders from Mesopotamia, but he had refused the reward that was offered to him by the king of Sodom. God is promising Abram that he will be sure to make up for this. He will reward Abram.

But Abram is not immediately satisfied with this. He had heard the Lord promise such things before, but now he is beginning to wonder. How will God reward him? How will his name be made great if it dies off with him? How will he be made into a great nation if he doesn't even have a biological heir?

I want to point out that Abram's response to the Lord in this passage is something that is very common in the life of faith. We see another biblical example of it in the response of the prophet Elijah after his defeat of the prophets of Baal in the contest on Mount Carmel. Like Abram in this passage, Elijah had just won a great victory, but he almost

immediately fell into despair. As he looked ahead, he could see that the tide was still strongly against him, and he did not want to go on fighting. This seems to be something like what Abram was experiencing in this passage. Yes, he had just won a great battle, but now that he sat down to consider his situation, his spirits began to sink. How would God's promises be fulfilled? It seemed too difficult, even impossible. Things were beginning to look beyond hope to him. Have there ever been times in your life when you felt that way? It is an experience that is shared by many Christians, an experience that some have referred to as spiritual depression.

What is the cure for spiritual depression? There is only one cure. It is faith. Faith is what brings Abram up out of the pit. And as Paul says in Romans 10, faith begins by hearing the Word of the Lord. That is what happens here. The Lord responded to Abram's doubts and questions. He reassured him. He made his promises even more explicit to him. He told him that he would indeed have a son for an heir, and from that son God would produce as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. God responded to Abram's doubts by speaking his Word to him. And Abram believed what the Lord told him. He placed his faith in God's Word.

Abram's faith is described by a phrase that is extremely important to the biblical theology of salvation. Verse 6 says that God counted Abram's faith to him as righteousness. You may know that this verse is used twice in the letters of the apostle Paul as he develops and explains the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And it is because of those passages that we can say with certainty that this verse is not saying that

God looked upon Abram's faith as something that earned him favor with God. That would make Abram's faith into a work. It would go directly against Paul's teaching in Romans 4:4-5, where he asserts, "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." In other words, faith is not a work. It is not something that earns us favor with God. Faith is merely the hand by which we receive what God freely offers us in the gospel. When you and I believe the gospel, when we acknowledge our utter helplessness in sin and look to Christ alone to save us, then God looks upon us as completely righteous for Christ's sake. He counts our sins as completely paid for by Christ's death, and he counts Christ's righteousness as our own. It is what Martin Luther described as "the great exchange." We give Christ our sin, and he gives us his righteousness. This is the only way we can enjoy a covenant relationship with God. The only way to be counted righteous is by faith.

The second thing that this passage teaches us about God's covenantal dealings with his people is that there will be opposition to the covenant. The Lord made this known to Abram in verse 12 and following, as Abram fell into a sort of nightmare as the sun went down. God showed him that there would be dark days ahead for his people before God's promise of an inheritance in Canaan was fulfilled. The mention of four hundred years of service and affliction is a clear reference to Israel's time of captivity in Egypt, the captivity from which they were finally delivered at the exodus. God will be faithful to

his promise, but his people will have to endure a period of suffering before the promise is fulfilled.

Notice that God does not hide this from Abram. This is not prosperity gospel, at least not as the prosperity gospel is preached today. There will be prosperity for God's people, but not until God's appointed time. It was true in Abram's day, and it remains true in our day. For the people of Israel, it meant waiting until after a period of slavery in Egypt before inheriting the land. For us, it means waiting until Christ's return before we enter into our inheritance in God's kingdom. Our lives in this world are analogous to the lives of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. We are not home yet. And for this reason, we should expect to face opposition as God's covenant people.

I also want to call your attention to verse 16. God told Abram that one of the reasons for the delay in bringing his descendants into Canaan was that "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." The Amorites were one of the main groups of people living in Canaan at that time. God was waiting for their sin to accumulate until it reached a point that was beyond toleration. When that time came, he would send his judgment against them by dispossessing them of their land and giving it to the people of Israel. Salvation for Israel would mean judgment for the Amorites. The same could be said of the final judgment: for us, the day of Christ's return will be the consummation of our salvation; but for the ungodly, it will be the day of condemnation. This verse teaches us that God's timing in bringing about his judgment is by no means arbitrary. He ensures that his judgment is fully deserved.

The third thing that this passage teaches us about God's covenantal dealings with his people is that God himself bears the complete responsibility in fulfilling the terms of the covenant. Covenants in the ancient world typically specified certain benefits that could be expected if the terms of the covenant were upheld, as well as certain penalties that would follow if the terms were broken. In this covenant, God promises to bestow the benefits upon Abram's offspring, but he also promises to bear the penalties that would be incurred if Abram's offspring failed to uphold the covenant. It is an entirely one-sided promise.

We can see this by looking at the ritual that is performed with the sacrificial animals in our text. This was a customary ritual in the ancient Near Eastern world. Typically, it was done by two parties, usually nations, who were entering into a binding relationship with each other. Once the animals were suitably prepared for the ritual, both parties would walk through the pieces to signify their commitment to what was being promised. It was a self-maledictory oath. When each party walked through the pieces, they were saying, 'May I become like these dead animals if I ever break the terms of this covenant.'

Notice, however, what is different about the ritual in our passage. Here it is not both parties, but only the Lord, who is symbolized by the smoking oven and flaming torch, who passes through the pieces. Abram does not walk through them. God takes the covenantal curses entirely upon himself. In other words, if Abram or his offspring fail to uphold the terms of the covenant, the punishment for covenant-breaking will fall upon the Lord. God was saying, 'May I become like these animals if I do not fulfill what I have

promised you, even if the reason why I cannot fulfill it is due to your rejection of me!” In the words of Michael Horton, “God alone takes that walk, assuming all of the responsibility for carrying the promise through to the end and bearing all of the curses for its breach.” [*God of Promise*, 41] The Lord swore a self-maledictory oath to Abram in order to assure him that he would fulfill his promise, no matter what. Even if Abram’s descendants failed to uphold their end of the covenant, which they did, God would bear the curse that should have fallen upon them. This oath stands as an early foreshadowing of the cross of Christ, for it was on the cross that Jesus was made a curse for our sake. As Edmund Clowney writes, “That mysterious oath has a dreadful solemnity. It points beyond the centuries of bondage in Egypt, beyond the gift of the Promised Land, to the day when God’s pledge by his own life would be paid in blood.” [*The Unfolding Mystery*, 48] God made his promise so certain that nothing would be able to thwart it, not even our sin.

In many ways, our situation is very similar to the situation that Abram faced at the beginning of this passage. We have not yet received all of what God has promised us as his covenant people. We have not yet received the glory that he has promised us in Christ. We are not yet at our final home. And this is why we too need to walk by faith. It is why we must not be surprised at the opposition that we face as God’s people. And it is why we can be absolutely certain that God will bring to pass everything that he has promised us in his Word. The covenant that he has made with us is a covenant that has been sealed by an oath, an oath in his own blood.