

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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Scripture: Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-21

"The Covenants of Promise" (part 3)

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE COVENANTS

We have been doing a series on the Covenants of God found in His Word. If you are going to grasp God's plan for mankind, you need to understand His covenants. Recall that a covenant is a solemn, formal and binding contract between two parties – whether between groups of people or individuals. They include a promise, an obligation to keep the promise, a ratification or seal and the actual fulfillment of the obligation. We already looked at the covenant God made with Adam and Eve and all their descendants (ie.mankind). Last week, we addressed the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants and all living creatures. Today, I want us to look at the third divine covenant of Holy Scripture – the one God made with Abraham. It is a covenant not only recognized by Christians but by Jews and Moslems as well – though the latter groups misunderstand and misapply it.

THE CALL OF ABRAM

To set the stage we need to turn to **Genesis 12:1-3**:

"Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ²And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

God called Abram (note Abraham's first name was Abram which means "exalted father") to leave his land (Abram traveled from Ur (in modern day Iraq) and then settled in Haran (in modern day Syria) before being called by God to move) and to take his family and his servants and livestock and move to a new land - Canaan. Now it should be noted that Abram is a descendant of Noah's son Shem, who in turn is a descendant of Eve's son, Seth. Remember the point made about Seth last week.

This call sets the stage for the covenant yet to be revealed. At the same time, an important point is being made by God's Word. For to leave behind what is familiar, to leave your home and your extended family is not easy. It is a major step of faith, isn't it? And yet, God often times calls us to leave things and places behind, to serve Him. We have experience with that, don't we? We left a familiar place to start anew in this new place. And when we follow the Lord's lead, He always promises to bless us. Notice what God promises Abram. God says that He will bless Abram and that through him, he will be a blessing to many nations.

Do you know why God blesses us? So that we can be a blessing to others. God blesses us to bless others. But if we don't use what God gives us to bless others, then we will stop the cycle of blessing and eventually we will not receive all that God wants us to have. We will short circuit His goodness in our lives.

Now how exactly will God bless Abram? It is found in the covenant He establishes with him. Please turn now to **Genesis 15:1-18**.

THE COVENANT FIRST ESTABLISHED

¹*After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying,
"Do not fear, Abram,
I am a shield to you;
Your reward shall be very great."*

²*Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"* ³*And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."* ⁴*Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."* ⁵*And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them "* *And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."* ⁶*Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

⁷*And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."* ⁸*He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?"* ⁹*So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon."* ¹⁰*Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.* ¹¹*The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.*

¹²*Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.* ¹³*God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴"But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵"As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶"Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." ¹⁷It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.*

¹⁸*On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates"*

Here we have the Abrahamic covenant first stated in the Bible. Note that God promises Abram many descendants (as numerous as the stars in the heavens) and He promises him land. The covenant is ratified through animal sacrifice. This ritual was most likely similar to the ancient parity contracts in which both parties were considered equal and would pass between the animal halves to symbolize the seriousness of keeping the agreement along with the implication that if anyone should fail to live up to the contract they should face the same fate as the animals that were sacrificed. Of course, in this case, note that *only* God's presence "walks" between the animal halves. Abram does not pass through the animal halves. Why? God and Abram are not equals. God is the One who establishes and sets the conditions of His covenant and He does so through animal sacrifice.

ABRAM BECOMES "ABRAHAM" AS THE COVENANT IS RESTATED

Gen. 17:1-21:

¹Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ²"I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." ³Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

⁴"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,
And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

⁵"No longer shall your name be called Abram,
But your name shall be Abraham;
For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

⁶"I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. ⁷"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁸"I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

⁹God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

¹⁰"This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

¹¹"And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹²"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³"A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴"But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

¹⁵Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶"I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" ¹⁹But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰"As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

THE PROMISES AND SIGNS OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The Abrahamic Covenant is restated and more details are included in Genesis 17. God calls Abram to change His name to “Abraham.” This name change is to show that God’s covenant is personal and transformational. Abram’s very name is changed to proclaim the truth of God’s promise that He will be a father of a multitude of nations. In addition, there is not only the promise of many descendants and land, but God promises that He will be Abraham’s and his descendants’ God forever. So the Lord is promising His eternal presence for the descendants of Abraham. And who will be the first descendant to benefit from this covenant? Isaac. God will bless Abraham with a son who will be heir to the covenant promises.

What does Abraham have to do on his part? While following God is grounded in faith as demonstrated in **Gen. 15:6**; the obligation on the part of Abraham and his descendants will be male circumcision (**Gen. 17:10**). This will also serve as a sign of the covenant. So now we have three signs of God’s covenant with Abraham: 1) the initial ritual of animal sacrifice that ratified the covenant in **Gen. 15**, 2) circumcision, and 3) the promise of a son, Isaac.

But lest we think that this covenant is only about the physical signs above, we would miss the eternal significance of what God has promised. Next week, we will see how the true fulfillment of this covenant is spiritual and how it affects us all today. For we are members and heirs of this covenant, we are the children of Abraham and as such, children of the eternal promises of God. Let us pray....