

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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I. Introduction

- A. [Turn in your bibles to Genesis 12.]
- B. A series of messages on Biblical Covenants.
- C. Last Sunday – introduction and Noahic Covenant.
- D. Today – God's covenant with Abraham, the “Abrahamic Covenant.”
- E. The single most important covenant in the Old Testament in relation to understanding God's plan for Israel and the nations in history.¹

II. The Initial Promise To Abram (Gen. 12:1-3).

- A. God appears to Abram while he is still in Mesopotamia, probably in Ur (Acts 7:2).
- B. Various stipulations are set forth.
- C. Leave your country and family.
 - 1. Abram's father, Terah, was an idolator (Jos. 24:2).
 - 2. God's sovereign selection from among a world of idol worshipers: a gentile who is to become “the father of the Jews” (Matt. 3:9; Luke 1:73; John 8:56).
 - 3. Separation *to* God always involves separation *from* the worldly culture.
 - a) Complete obedience did not come at first, but as Abram responded, each stage of obedience brought additional revelation and a deeper relationship with God.
 - b) As it was for Abram then, so it is for us in our calling as individual believers even now.
- D. To a land that I will show you.
 - 1. Destination: an unknown land.
 - 2. Implication: he will be given another place of residence, a hint of the “promised land” developed further in chapter 15.
- E. Make you a great nation, a great name.
 - 1. Personal renown, many physical offspring.
 - 2. Highly regarded by the three great greatest religions of the world (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity).

¹

The Abrahamic covenant is foundational to all of Scripture. It is the key to both the Old and New Testaments and is foundational to the whole program of redemption. All subsequent revelation is the outworking of this covenant. This covenant, and the subsequent covenant framework, is the key to understanding Scripture. [Steven L. McAvoy, “Abrahamic Covenant” in Mal Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), p. 27.]

- F. "You be a blessing" - an imperative command.
- G. A dividing line of blessing and cursing.
 - 1. God will respond to others in relation to how they treat Abram!
 - 2. God is saying, essentially, that He and Abram will have the same friends and the same enemies.
 - 3. This theme goes well beyond Abram and is applied to his offspring: the nation of Israel.
 - 4. Even when God uses another nation to discipline wayward Israel, woe to that nation which is used in such a way (Jer. 25:9-12; Zec. 1:15).
- H. A global blessing for all families of the earth.
 - 1. Includes those who are outside of Abram's physical line of descent.
 - a) That's us!
 - b) Will elaborate further on this later.

III. Promises Become A Formally Ratified Covenant (Gen 15:1-21).

- A. Additional promises
 - 1. Innumerable descendants (as the number of stars, Gen. 15:5).
 - 2. "This land" as an inheritance (Gen. 15:7).
 - a) Notice the demonstrative pronoun: literally, "the land, the this"
 - (1) God: "The land." The listener: "which land?" God, "The THIS land."
 - b) The land being identified is a specific earthly piece of real-estate occupied by specific people groups whom God will judge (Gen. 15:18-21)
 - c) The Promised Land is not some "pie in the sky, by and by" (Gen 15:18-21).
 - d) Last week: the sufficiency of language and the normative understanding of the original recipient of the promise. *How would have Abram understood this statement?*
 - 3. Prophecies Israel's servitude in Egypt.
 - a) Descendants will be strangers serving in a foreign land four hundred years (Gen. 15:13).
 - b) Come out with great possessions (Gen. 15:14).
 - (a) Their return to "this land" is connected with God's judgment on the iniquity of the Amorites which will be "full" by then (Gen. 15:16).
 - (b) God is not bound to "first tribes" views of land ownership. He is free to judge nations and people groups who have "defiled the land" with their ungodly practices.

- c) Abram will not participate in the Egyptian bondage, but will live to an old age.
- B. "Cutting" the covenant – but highly unusual.
 - 1. Typical: animals cut in half, two parties walk between (see Jer. 34:18-20).
 - 2. Here: one of the two parties, Abram, is kept from initiating his participation.
 - a) Abram in a deep sleep (Gen. 15:12).
 - b) Abram does not walk between the animal pieces (Gen. 15:17).
 - c) A manifestation of God: a smoking oven with a burning torch which passes between the animal parts ratifying the covenant in a unilateral manner.²
 - d) Abram becomes a recipient and beneficiary of the covenant, but not a *participant*.
 - e) Since Abram did not walk between the parts to ratify the covenant, he cannot break the covenant.
 - f) As if God is saying, "Pay attention – this ratification is unusual because it is the foundation for other important covenants to come!"
 - g) A unilateral covenant – hinging only upon one party: God.
 - h) Due to the nature of God, "unilateral" also means "unconditional" in terms of eventual fulfillment.
 - (1) Even where conditions appear in relation to the outworking of the covenant, it is God Who is certifying He will bring the fulfillment about.
 - (2) Disobedient generations will not enjoy the promises, but God will certainly bring fulfillment about in an eventual obedience generation.
 - (3) He does this by His Spirit Who works repentance and obedience in the hearts of people (Jer. 31:33-34; Eze. 36:25-27; Zec. 12:10-14).

IV. Additional Conditions And A Sign (Gen. 17).

- A. Numerous offspring (Gen. 17:2-6)
 - 1. Father of a multitude of nations (Gen. 17:4)
 - 2. Names changed to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17:5,15).
 - 3. Kings as offspring (Gen. 17:6).
 - 4. Nations and kings from Sarah's womb. Sarah was 99 years old at the time (Gen. 17:16-17).
 - a) Establishes a line of promise, the covenant will be directed through specific offspring of Abraham, leading ultimately to Christ.
 - (1) Isaac (Gen. 17:19,21; Gen. 21:12; 25:5).

2

The Hebrew grammar implies that perhaps only the burning torch passed between the pieces. The verb for "passed" is 3rd person singular ("it passed"). That ASV, KJV, and the Tanakh all place a comma after "smoking oven" in recognition that it may only be the torch which participates in the ratification walk.

- (a) Repeated twice in this chapter for emphasis (Gen. 17:19,21).
- (2) Not Ishmael (Gen. 17:19).
 - (a) Ishmael also to be fruitful and father a great nation (Gen. 17:20).
- (3) Jacob who is Israel, not Esau who is Edom (Gen. 25:23; Gen. 28:3-4,13-15; 35:11; 48:4; Luke 1:33).
- (4) Judah (Gen. 49:10).
- (5) David (2S. 7:12-16; 1Chr. 17:11).
- (6) Jesus (Luke 1:32-33).
- B. Land of Canaan given as an everlasting possession to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:8).
 - 1. This has implications in our own day which we'll touch on later.
- C. Everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:7).
 - 1. Sign – circumcision (Gen. 17:11).
 - a) Similar to the sign of the rainbow (Noahic Covenant) and the Sabbath (Mosaic Covenant).
 - b) All males, both offspring and hired servants, circumcised on the 8th day (Gen. 17:10-14).
 - (1) Both John the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:29).

- c) Failure to be circumcised is said to constitute breaking the covenant and that *individual male* would be cut off from the people of promise.
- d) Although *individuals* could break the covenant and thereby be excluded from participation in the promises, individual failure could not nullify the unconditional nature of the covenant with other descendants of Abraham.
- e) Yet, the unilateral, unconditional nature of the covenant is divinely emphasized in the unusual ratification ceremony (Gen. 15:17).

V. Summary - Relevance Of Abrahamic Covenant Today

- A. This unilateral covenant is the fountainhead out of which other divine covenants flow.
 - a) Land = a promise of a physical region of land. The "Promised Land" or Land Covenant.
 - b) Seed = a promised name and offspring leading from Abraham to David and beyond. The Davidic Covenant.
 - c) Blessing = a global blessing to all families of the earth. Faith in Christ, the New Covenant.
- B. The Promised Land
 - 1. The modern dispute over land ownership in the Middle East is the direct result of a continued denial by men to acknowledge God's promise to Abraham.
 - 2. The formal ratification ceremony involving God walking between the animal parts is initiated by God in direct response to Abraham's question:
 - a) "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit [the land]?" (Gen. 15:8)
 - 3. This matter will be discussed further when we cover the Land Covenant.
- C. Blessing and Cursing
 - 1. Abraham's friends are God's friends, Abraham's enemies are God's enemies.
 - 2. The grammar includes a distinction in number: I will bless *those* (plural)... I will curse *him* (singular).
 - 3. One view: whoever treats Abram and the covenant with contempt, God will banish from participation in the promised blessings.³
 - 4. Another view: the promise of blessing and cursing is a general principle concerning how Abraham and his offspring, Israel, are treated by others.

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The point is simple: whoever treats Abram and the covenant with contempt, as worthless, God will banish from the blessing. It is important also to note that the verb is not a cohortative, but a simple imperfect. Since God is binding himself to Abram, this would then be an obligatory imperfect: "but the one who treats you with contempt I must curse." [NET Bible Notes : Study Notes for the New English Translation, electronic edition., Ge 12:4 (Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1998)].

- a) This promise of blessing and cursing concerning Abraham and the line of his offspring leading through Isaac to Jacob who is Israel, appears frequently in Scripture (Ex. 23:22; Num. 23:8; Num. 24:9; Deu. 7:15; 30:7; Isa. 41:11-12; 49:25-26; Isa. 25:3-8; 35:5-15; 36:5-17; Jer. 30:16; Joel 3:1-7; Mtt. 25:40-41,45).
- b) God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22:6,12).
 - (1) Instead, he prophesied a blessing which is rooted in the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.
 - (a) 'He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?' "Blessed [is] he who blesses you, And cursed [is] he who curses you." (Num. 24:9 cf. Num. 23:8)
 - (b) Here, God repeats the Abrahamic formula involving blessing and cursing and applies it to how others treat Israel as a nation.
 - c) Although this promise is sometimes conditioned on Israel's obedience (Deu. 30:7), why would a nation want to take the risk of opposing Abraham's offspring to whom such a promise was made by God Himself? Isn't this playing with fire?
 - d) When Balaam was hired to curse Israel, Israel was in *disobedience*.
 - (1) Refusal to enter the promised land (Num. 14).
 - (2) Repeated rebellion against Moses and Aaron (Num. 16, 17, 21).
 - (3) Moses disobedience striking the rock at Kadesh.
 - (4) Judgment by fiery serpents sent by God (Num. 21).
 - (5) Yet God still blessed Israel – this illustrates the unilateral aspect of the promise.
5. Evidence for this view concerning the applicability of blessing and cursing in relation to Israel is found in several passages where God refers to Jacob or Zion as the "Apple of My Eye."
 - a) For the LORD'S portion [is] His people; Jacob [is] the place of His inheritance. "He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. (Deu. 32:9-10 NKJV)
 - b) "Up, Zion! Escape, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon." For thus says the LORD of hosts: "He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. (Zec. 2:7-8 NKJV)
6. Is it possible that the welfare of a nation could be tied, in part, to its treatment of Abraham's descendants after the flesh: Israel?

- a) This was certainly the case for King Balak of Moab when he hired Balaam to curse Israel.
 - b) Even after the crucifixion of her Messiah, Paul said the covenants and promises still pertained to Israel (Rom. 9:4).
 - (1) The "promises" referred to by Paul almost certainly include this promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.
 - c) This is not because Abraham's Israelite descendants are better than other people. It is because such people set themselves against God's will.
7. Modern examples – the decline of England and the accelerating decline of the United States?
- a) Could our mutual decline be tied to an ever-increasing waffling in support for the only democracy in the Middle East?
 - b) Is our growing financial weakness and continued inability to extract ourselves from expensive military quagmires partly a result of the waning blessings of God?
 - c) Perhaps the growing godlessness of our nation will seal our fate regardless of our treatment of Israel. But shouldn't the way in which we, as a biblically-informed nation, relate to the "apply of His eye" be an important consideration in our foreign policy?
- D. The Abrahamic Covenant continues today, it is the Mosaic Covenant which was broken and superseded.
- 1. The Mosaic Covenant is a different national covenant with many challenging stipulations (the Law) and a different sign (the Sabbath).
 - 2. The Mosaic Covenant was broken by Israel (Deu. 31:16,20; Isa. 24:5; Hos. 8:1) requiring a New Covenant which was ratified in the death of Christ (Jer. 31:31-32; Luke 22:20).
 - a) Our topic next week.
 - 3. Paul emphasized the distinctiveness of the Abrahamic Covenant from the Mosaic when he wrote to the Galatians.

- a) Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. And this I say, [that] the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance [is] of the law, [it is] no longer of promise; but God gave [it] to Abraham by promise. (Ga 3:16-18 NKJV)
- E. The foundation of salvation by faith – the blessing for all families of the earth.
 - a) An individual's trust, "by faith," in the physical Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, brings the global blessing available to all families of the earth (Gal. 3:16).
 - b) And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, [saying], "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who [are] of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Ga 3:8-9 NKJV)
 - c) For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Ga 3:26 NKJV)
 - d) And if you [are] Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Ga 3:29 NKJV)
 - e) More on this when we discuss the New Covenant.