

THE GOD WHO PURSUES (2)

The Covenant with Abraham

"I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."

A. How many covenants?

"A covenant is a relationship, initiated and imposed by a superior, with life or death consequences."
(David Murray)

1. In the Bible there are FIVE major covenants that God makes with people showing His desire to be in relationship with them.

A covenant at Creation with Adam and Eve and then with Noah and his family (Genesis 1-3; 6-9).

A covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12; 15; 17).

A covenant with Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 19:3b-8; 20-24).

A covenant with David and the kingdom of Israel (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89).

A new covenant of Jesus with the church (Jeremiah 31-34; Ezekiel 33:29-39:29).

2. Some theologians speak about there being THREE covenants.

Covenant of Redemption – the agreement made between the members of the Trinity where the Son agrees to become a man, be our representative, obey the demands of the covenant, and pay the penalty our sins deserved so we can be saved.

"a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time." (Titus 1:2)

Covenant of Works – an agreement between God and Adam in which Adam was promised the blessing of relationship with God and eternal life upon obedience, and death should he disobey.

Covenant of Grace – Adam broke the covenant of works so God establishes another covenant through which man could be saved as revealed in the 5 major covenants in the Bible.

3. Is there a difference between the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace?

The covenant of redemption promises relationship with God and eternal life through faith in Christ.

The covenant of works promises relationship with God and eternal life through faith in Christ – if Adam trusts in Christ who he met with in the Garden and obeyed Him, he would have remained in relationship with God and had eternal life (eat from the Tree of Life).

The covenant of grace promises relationship with God and eternal life for all who trust in Christ.

4. There is ONE eternal covenant expressed in FIVE historical covenants.

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep." (Hebrews 13:20)

The eternal covenant is God's desire to have a people of his own.

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Revelation 21:3)

The eternal covenant is expressed and explained through the five covenants of the Bible.

B. The story so far... The Covenant at Creation

1. God pursues at creation a relationship with the people He has made in His image.

He makes a covenant with Adam with life or death consequences.

Adam was to love, trust and obey God by ruling over the world.

If he obeyed he would enjoy the blessing of eternal life (eat from the Tree of Life) in the presence of God (the Garden of Eden).

If he disobeyed he would experience death and separation from God.

2. Adam broke the covenant and this resulted in death and separation from God as he is banished from the Garden of Eden.

"Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there." (Hosea 6:7)

3. God pursues and provides a way to have relationship with people outside of the Garden by promising a Saviour who would undo the curse of sin through a sacrifice that takes the penalty of death instead of them.

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

God's people are those who trust in this Saviour.

"Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel." (Genesis 4:1-2)

4. By the time of Noah, the beautiful and good earth was ruined and there were very few people who were trusting in this Saviour.

Sin is refusing to trust in Christ.

"In regard to sin, because men do not believe in me." (John 16:9)

God cannot allow sin to go unpunished and judges it by destroying all life with the Flood.

5. God continues to pursue a relationship with people by telling Noah what He was going to do and by providing a means for Noah and others who trust in the Saviour to be kept safe.

"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you." (Genesis 6:18-19)

6. After the Flood, God reaffirms the covenant made at creation with Adam with Noah.

Noah was to love, trust and obey God by ruling over the world.

But no human is able to keep the covenant God made at creation.

The only way God can pursue and remain in a relationship with people is if He takes the penalty of death covenant breakers deserve (the serpent crusher's heel will be bruised, the bow is pointed up at heaven).

The only way people can be in relationship with God is through faith in God's Saviour who takes the penalty of death they deserve.

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6)

7. The covenant at creation reveals the eternal covenant.

C. The Covenant with Abraham

1. History repeats itself at Babel.

The family of Noah ends up in the same chaos and corruption as the family of Adam did.

At Babel, people reject God as they try to make a name for themselves and disobey God's command by staying together.

"Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4)

God's response is to return the earth to chaos like before the first day of creation.

"So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:8-9)

2. Out of the chaos, God again pursues relationship with people, by beginning another new creation, with another new Adam, Abram.

God needs to be a God who pursues and provides a way to have relationship with people – a fresh start and a new human covenant partner will not work.

God preaches the gospel to Abram while he was living in Ur.

"The Scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Galatians 3:8)

"The LORD has said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

"You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans." (Nehemiah 9:7)

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived at Haran." (Acts 7:2)

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." (John 8:56)

Abram is given the role Adam (and then Noah) was given – he is blessed by God, God will make him fruitful and multiply, possess a land to rule over.

Through him the curse will be reversed – 5 blessings of Genesis 12:1-3 cancel out the 5 curses of Genesis 3-11.

Abram turns from sin and trusts in Christ.

"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods.'" (Joshua 24:2)

"So Abram left, as the LORD had told him." (Genesis 12:4)

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

D. God's promise to Abram (Genesis 12)

1. God promises blessing to Abram as an individual – be a great nation, be blessed, be given a great name.

Be a great nation includes the promise of land (you cannot be a great nation without a place for a large number of people to live) and descendants.

For this promise to be kept God will need to make Abram fruitful and multiply him – but his wife Sarai is barren.

For this promise to be kept God will need to provide a land for this great nation to live – but there were people already in the land.

"At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." (Genesis 12:7)

Be given a great name is to be viewed as a royal figure (Abram is a royal figure due to his Adamic role).

"Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth." (2 Samuel 7:9)

2. God promises blessing to the world through Abram – blessing and cursing based on relation to Abram; all nations will be blessed through his offspring.

God's plan to bless Abram is the means of bringing blessing and salvation to all nations.

The promised Saviour is going to be one of Abraham's descendants.

"The Scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Galatians 3:8)

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds", meaning many people, but "and to your seed", meaning one person, who is Christ." (Galatians 3:16)

"When God thinks of Abraham's offspring he sees them as contained within one descendant – the promised Saviour." (BN Arnold)

Abraham's offspring, God's people, are those who are 'in' Christ.

Union with Christ is the means by which someone, Jew or Gentile, becomes a true child of Abraham.

"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost." (Luke 19:9)

This means that not all of Abraham's descendants are his children.

"I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word." (John 8:37)

"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did." (John 8:39)

"For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." (Romans 9:6)

"In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (Romans 9:8)

Yet God has a special longing for Abraham's physical descendants to receive the benefits of covenant relationship by trusting in Christ.

"As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs." (Romans 11:28)

So those who listen to the gospel preached to Abraham and believe in Christ are Abraham's true children.

E. God's covenant with Abram (Genesis 15)

1. God confirms these promises by making a covenant with Abram.

Abram wonders how he could be a great nation when he is childless.

"But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." (Genesis 15:2-3)

"Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:4-5)

Abram wonders how he could be a great nation when he has no land.

"But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?" (Genesis 15:8)

"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land..." (Genesis 15:18)

2. The covenant is established by a ceremony.

Animals are killed and cut in two and the two halves are laid facing each other.

"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. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him." (Genesis 15:9-12)

Only God passes between the halves of the dead animals.

"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." (Genesis 15:17)

God is saying that He is willing to die on behalf of Abram and his descendants if they fall short of the terms of the covenant.

For God to pursue a relationship with people will mean His own death since no human will or can keep the covenant.

This is why God can credit Abraham with righteousness the moment he believes.

"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:6)

Abram still tries to ensure the promise is kept in his own strength through Hager and Ishmael.

F. God's covenant with Abram is reaffirmed (Genesis 17)

1. God reaffirms the covenant promise to Abram and in doing so by changes his name to Abraham.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." (Genesis 17:1-2)

"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations." (Genesis 17:5)

Abraham is called to walk before God – to be His representative.

He does that by being blameless – by being in a right relationship with God.

In this way he and his descendants would be a blessing to the nations.

When the world looks at Abraham and his family they were meant to see what it is like to have a right relationship with God.

Key to this is the location of the land, which was located on the route between the superpowers of the ancient world.

"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." (Genesis 17:7-8)

As people passed through Canaan, they were supposed to see a group of people who were in a right relationship with God and who were ruling over the land under God's rule (seen in the way they treated one another and the earth's resources).

This will result in Abraham not just being a blessing to the nations, but becoming more than one nation, and His descendants inheriting more than the land of Canaan, the world.

"I will make you very fruitful: I will make nations of you and kings will come from you." (Genesis 17:6)

"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." (Romans 4:13)

But God knew Abraham and his descendants would fail to keep the covenant, which is why He goes through the animal pieces in Abraham's place.

God will keep the covenant for Abraham (as the obedient son) and pay the penalty Abraham deserves for breaking the covenant.

"For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Genesis 18:19)

2. Abraham is told to identify with the covenant by practicing circumcision.

"Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring." (Genesis 17:9-12)

Circumcision did not save. Only faith in Christ does.

"And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." (Romans 4:11)

But circumcision pointed to the One who Abraham and his descendants needed to trust in to be saved.

This covenant sign was like the covenant ceremony.

Circumcision was a cutting off and by undergoing the cutting off of circumcision Abraham and his descendants were identifying with covenant and what it promised.

Circumcision was a cutting off that comes awfully close to cutting off the Offspring.

It was a sign of the cutting off of THE Offspring Jesus Christ.

By undergoing circumcision, they were identifying with the One who walked between the animals on their behalf and who would be cut off because of their failure to keep the covenant, and being reminded of their need to trust in Him.

But if the people refused to undergo the cutting off of circumcision, they would be cut off from God's people.

"Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Genesis 17:14)

"The LORD is saying: "Identify with the cutting off of Christ, or you yourself will be cut off." (Glen Scrivener)

So circumcision was an outward sign of the inward need to trust in Christ.

3. This covenant God made with Abraham is passed down to his descendants.

"The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed." (Genesis 26:2-4)

"There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. You and your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." (Genesis 28:13-15)

G. Summary

1. Out of the chaos of Babel, God pursues a relationship with people by making a covenant with Abraham.

God promises Abraham that he will be a great nation, which will bring blessing to the whole world.

One of his offspring will be God's promised Saviour.

2. God knew Abraham and his descendants would fail to keep the covenant, so God pursues a relationship by promising an obedient son who would keep the covenant and pay the penalty covenant breakers deserve.

Circumcision pointed to the offspring who would be cut off for them.

By undergoing circumcision they were identifying with Christ and their need to trust in Him.

3. All who trust in Christ are God's people, true children of Abraham.

The promise that from Abraham will come many nations is being kept today.

4. The covenant with Abraham reveals more of the eternal covenant.