

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 The Covenant
March 16, 2025

Before there was religion in Israel, there was covenant. Before covenant came to mean some kind of agreement, or the recognition of an implied commandment, or a promise, or both, it simply meant, “relationship.” Human beings, and I use that term on purpose, for it not only addresses *us* at the deepest level of our humanity, but also addresses every human being; have always been in a relationship with God, because God has established it. So before there was religion, there was relationship with God. Before there was religion, there was grace.

The word, “testament,” is simply another way of saying, “covenant, as in the New Covenant and the Old. Before all that, human beings were called out of nothing to be in relation to God, all of us. The first covenant in the bible was with Noah after the flood. In it, God promised never again to destroy the world with water, and left the rainbow as a sign of that promise.

The first time Abram is mentioned in the Bible, it is in the Book of Genesis. In the twelfth chapter, he is on the receiving end of such a promise, that he will become the father of a great nation, which will in turn become a blessing to all the world. And there is a demand, that he leave home for a distant land. The only drawback is that he didn't have any children.

Later in chapter 17, Abraham received the covenant of circumcision, in which God more formally established

the promises made in Chapter 12. At that time, what became one of the initial religious rituals, circumcision, was added to the distinctive features of Abram's life. Religion happens. Religion is secondary. Relation to God is primary.

It is in the 15th chapter that we find another promise and another agreement. And this time is the first that is called a covenant. It is known as the Abrahamic covenant, though at the time his name was Abram. He had no sons by his wife Sarai.

In this covenant, he is promised that his descendants will *inherit the land*. As the original promise was affirmed, and extended, we are given the statement, that Paul quoted in Romans, and stands as *his* side of the bargain;

“Abram *believed* the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Even so, Abraham wanted a reassurance. So the story continues with a ceremony. God asked Abram to bring a shelter, perhaps a tent; and also a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon. He cut the goat and ram into two pieces, and arranged them, and then fell into a deep sleep.

God then foretold to him that there would be a sojourn into Egypt for 400 years, and then his descendants would return to the land. Then there was a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch that passed between the pieces,

“to your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river Euphrates.”

At this point in time, there was no bible, no temple, no king; there were no psalms, no sacrifices, no priests, no shrines, and no rituals, not even circumcision. All there was, involved a conversation between Abram and God. In that conversation there are two features that serve as the central features of our religion, grace and faith, for these are the central features of any relationship. If there is no grace, there is nothing to believe in. If there is no trust, there is no relationship.

The great biblical clue that the most important aspect of life, both the divine life *and* the life of humanity, is the capacity for relationship, is imbedded not only into the idea of covenant, but also into the Ten Commandments and their summary statements;

From Deuteronomy, “The Lord your God is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength,” and its companion from the Leviticus, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

When asked, Jesus named these two as chief among the commandments. We all know this is true. We have been told countless times. We have read it countless times. These two summaries of the commandments are only made more essential when it is understood that they are not external to us, not just associated with what should be done, what is expected, but they describe God’s nature, and the original human nature

as well. They represent not only what is expected and required, but who we are and have been created to be.

They divide the two tablets, the first addressing a relationship with God, the second with people. They are strictly relational.

The idea of covenant between God and Abraham, or any of the other covenant expressions in the bible, goes farther. For what it tells us is that the whole basis of the arrangement involves first God’s action, taken in the act of Creation, and in the commitment to reconciliation, redemption. In the end, it does not depend on us, but wholly on God. It is *grace*.

In these chapters we see the relationship between God and Abram as the result of God’s choice; the call to Abram away from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan; the promise to make him the father of a great nation that would bless the world; the decision to extend the promise that the land would be given to his descendants; and all of this even before he had any children, and finally in the covenant of circumcision, that God would be their God, and they would be God’s people. It is all grace.

Yet there is a response. There is an acceptance. It is called Faith. The theologian Karl Barth put it this way, “God has created man in such a way that in the exercise of their genuine freedom they must will to confirm their humanity with (an) unequivocal Yes Again, it is God’s wisdom and omnipotence, God’s

sovereignty and creation, and therefore God's choice and decision, that they themselves will finally have to choose . . .”

And the part of Abraham, as he came to be called, the human part, was to *believe* . . . which is the biblical way of saying to have faith, which is the biblical way of saying yes to life and to God. Later, in Romans, when Paul is arguing that circumcision is not all that it has been cracked up to be, he quotes from the 15th chapter of Genesis as we have already seen, “Abram believed God . . . and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

And in the end these truths are true not only for Abraham's literal descendants through Isaac and Jacob, but for all of us, who are Abraham's spiritual descendants, for *every human being*. Like for Abraham, it is *ours* to *believe*.

We live in the age of technology, of reason, of science and philosophy, the time after the Enlightenment, but the theological ideas implied in this covenant, grace and faith, persevere, because they address us at the deepest level of our being. They refuse to be set aside by those who think them unnecessary or of secondary concern. They refuse to concede that the meaning of our lives is caught up in the sum of all the physical parts; or that value and worthiness are the result of accomplishments that we achieve in the various facets of life, even our religious accomplishments (see Paul).

Rather, this grace, calls us into the relationship for which we have been created, one that can only be apprehended in faith. No other approach to life has the power that God's grace, accepted by faith has, for the fulfillment of our lives. *That is the covenant* that God makes here with Abram. That is the covenant that God has made with us, in Christ Jesus.

Romans 12:3

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love in Action

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The illustration of the body, the emphasis more on the oneness than the parts.

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