

Genesis 15B (2011)

- We don't have to study the Bible for long before we're confronted with teaching on covenants
 - The Bible makes frequent mention of covenants
 - A covenant is a Bible word for a solemn agreement between two parties
 - Covenants came in different forms, but they all bound the parties to each other for some purpose
 - Every work of God in His creation is done on the basis of a covenant
 - God uses covenantal agreements to reveal Himself and His plans to men
 - Since God's word is unbreakable, every covenant God makes is permanent and completely trustworthy
 - And these moments are important mile markers in God's plan for history, for they set the terms for how men and God will relate to one another
 - A covenant is established in very specific ways, using specific rituals to mark entry into the agreement by each party
 - Sometimes Scripture records these moments clearly enough that we can see the covenant coming into place
 - Other times, the effects of the covenant can be seen, but the ritual that led to its establishment isn't described in the text
 - We could use the example of a marriage covenant
 - A marriage begins through a series of rituals that note the beginning of the relationship
 - Sometimes we are present when a marriage begins and we witness the marriage covenant ritual
 - Other times we meet a married couple long after the wedding ceremony took place

- We know they are married and therefore we know there was a marriage ritual performed even though we didn't witness it ourselves
- In Chapter 15 today, we find Abram about to receive a covenant from God
 - And the covenant comes in response to Abram's questions from last week
 - In v.2 Abram asked God what he might give Abram since he had no heirs
 - As we learned last week, Abram was asking God what good would it be for him to have the land if he had no one to inherit it?
 - Abram knew that it was meaningless to acquire something only to lose it at the end of his life
 - God responded by assuring Abram that he would have many heirs, as many as the stars
 - And Abram accepted God's promise because He believed God's word
 - And by his faith in God's word, God counted Abram's faith as righteousness
 - Proving that men are given righteousness by God on the basis of faith, not works, and we may follow in Abram's footsteps
 - Abram's conversation with God continues in v.7

[Gen. 15:7](#) 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."

[Gen. 15:8](#) He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?"

- This encounter began with God assuring Abram he would be protected and blessed
 - Abram responded with his question about an heir
 - God answered with His promise for many descendants
 - Now God reminds Abram that He was the One Who called Abram from Ur and gave him this land to possess it

- And then Abram responds with another question
- Before we examine the question, we need to get inside Abram's head for a moment
 - What did Abram think when he heard God say I brought you here to possess this land?
 - For example, we already know that Abram is living as a nomad in the land
 - The writer of Hebrews tells us clearly that Abram, and Isaac and Jacob after him lived in tents because they understood God's timeline
 - They understood that they wouldn't possess the land until after their deaths
 - They weren't expecting to receive their inheritance until after they were resurrected and returned to live in the Kingdom of the Messiah

[Heb. 11:8](#) By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

[Heb. 11:9](#) By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise;

[Heb. 11:10](#) for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

[Heb. 11:13](#) All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

[Heb. 11:14](#) For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own.

[Heb. 11:15](#) And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

[Heb. 11:16](#) But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

- So Abram knew that the promise of the land was not to be fulfilled in his lifetime
 - And that brings us back now to the conversation between Abram and God
 - God says once again that Abram will have this land to possess it

- What does Abram think as he hears these words?
 - He knows that the promise of the land won't be fulfilled until after his death
 - And he has God's assurance that a multitude of descendants will come after him, and they will inherit the land as well
 - So Abram asks a reasonable and even obvious question
 - How can I know that I will possess it?
- There are two reasons to ask a question like that
 - One reason is to seek proof because you doubt the promise
 - You ask for proof because you don't trust the person and the proof will be your assurance
 - A second reason is to seek confirmation, something tangible you can cling to while you wait for the fulfillment
 - And when we remember that Abram wasn't expecting to see the promise fulfilled in his lifetime nor in the lifetime of his descendants, it's reasonable to see him asking for assurance
 - What he wants is something he and his descendants can point back to and remember the covenant, even during the generations before it is fulfilled
- At this point, God honors Abram's request by presenting him with a covenant ritual
 - First, God gives Abram instructions on the preparations for the ritual

[Gen. 15:9](#) 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."

[Gen. 15:10](#) 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.

[Gen. 15:11](#) The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

- God affirm His promises to Abram by means of a covenant ritual
- To prepare, God instructs Abram to bring Him a collection of five animals

- And then Abram was to prepare them by butchering the larger animals into halves and laying them in a row facing one another
 - The two birds were not cut but were killed and likely set facing one another
 - The halves were probably only a foot or so apart based on the tradition for covenants
- We must also imagine that as Abram butchered the animals, it was a bloody affair
 - Some blood was spilled as the animals were initially killed
 - But even afterward as their carcasses lay on the ground, the blood in the meat would have drained further creating pools of blood on the ground
- This was the point of the exercise...to create a graphic depiction of death
 - This explains (in part) why there was a delay between when Abram cut the animals and when the rest of the ritual took place
 - God gave time for the blood to collect
 - There is a second symbolic reason for the delay which we will address in a minute
 - This also explains why the birds weren't to be cut, since it wouldn't produce a meaningful amount of blood
- These steps were standard practice in establishing a blood covenant
 - The animal blood was a substitute for the blood of those entering into the covenant
 - It was a graphic way of demonstrating that should either party break the promises of the covenant, this is what would happen to them
 - The other party would have the right to spill their blood
 - In fact, the Hebrew phrase for entering into a covenant is literally "cutting" covenant

- Which refers to the cutting of animals as part of the ritual
- The animals didn't go to waste
 - After the ritual, they were roasted and the meat was shared in a covenant meal
 - The sharing of the meat was significant because as both parties took the meat into their bodies, they were united
 - The sacrificed meat was symbolic of their own bodies, and now that flesh was a part of each man's body
 - They became united in the way they both ate the flesh that had represented their death vow
- The carcasses lie on the ground so long that they eventually attract vultures
 - Abram knows that these carcasses are important to God's purposes, so he scares the vultures off
 - This is a curious scene, and it's our first hint that this ritual communicates more than simply the terms of the covenant
 - It is also a picture of how God will work through Abram and his descendants in this covenant
 - Abram is made to wait for God to perform the ritual because the wait itself is a picture of how this covenant will be fulfilled
 - And the arrival of the vultures to pick apart at the sacrifice is another picture
 - But at this point the pictures aren't clear, because the answers are given in the last section of the chapter

[Gen. 15:12](#) Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.

[Gen. 15:13](#) 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.

[Gen. 15:14](#) "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

[Gen. 15:15](#) "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.

[Gen. 15:16](#) "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

- Most of the day has passed, and darkness come
 - And in that moment God places Abram into a deep sleep
 - The description of sleep here in Hebrew is the same as we saw in Genesis 2 when God placed Adam into a deep sleep to remove his rib
 - This is a supernatural sleep, once that renders the person incapacitated but not unconscious
 - We notice here that Abram still felt the terror and great darkness from the Lord's presence
 - Even Abram, a man who had been counted righteous by faith was still sinful
 - So as the holiness of God approached, Abram had the natural reaction...terror
 - And God uses this special form of sleep because it renders the person unable to act or respond, yet leaves them able to understand what was happening
 - Adam's sleep allowed him to understand what God was doing so that he might understand where woman came from
 - Here it permits Abram to understand
- While Abram is in this deep sleep, God begins to disclose more of His plans to Abram concerning His promises
 - God opens with a surprise announcement
 - Abram's descendants would live outside the promised land
 - Take note of the way God begins His statement
 - "Know for certain..."
 - God assures Abram that his descendants will only settle in the land after having left centuries earlier
 - We come to understand Abram's real concern based on what God says here

- Abram seems concerned for whether his descendants will remain in a faithful relationship with God or whether they will forfeit the promises
 - The Jewish commentary on this chapter thought that Abram asked for this assurance because he feared that his descendants would sin and anger God
 - If so, then God might take away the land and Abram wouldn't see it in his resurrection
- We don't know if this is true, but it makes some sense
 - God's statements here suggest that this entire moment was the result of Abram's insecurity over God's promises of land for his descendants
 - So God begins by saying, "Yes, Abram, they will live outside the land. You can be certain of that..."
 - It sounds as if God is addressing the real question in Abram's heart
- And to make matters worse, God goes on to say they will be enslaved and oppressed
 - God wisely doesn't name the place we know will be Egypt
 - For Israel must take this detour and naming the nation might have stopped the plan from happening
- As an aside, the date of 400 years does not describe the time they were in bondage...they were only in Egypt 215 years
 - It represents a count of years from the time Isaac is weaned until Israel leaves Egypt
 - The years between the arrival of the promised son until Israel's receiving of her next covenant
- Just as Abram's fears are running wild, God continues with the good news
 - God will keep His promises to Abram and bring his descendants out with many blessings
 - Though Abram will not live to see these things, God reminds him

- When it says you go to the grave in peace, it means without experiencing the slavery that is to come
- And after four generations, the people will return
 - The four generations refer to the generations that leave and return
 - Exodus 6 tell us that Levi left the land and four generations later, his descendant Moses brought them back
- Now we can appreciate the earlier delay when Abram ran off the vultures while waiting for God
 - We can see some of the symbolism of this chapter coming together
 - God tells Abram that the nation would be set outside the land for hundreds of years
 - And that would result in a delay for the people occupying the land
 - Earlier we saw the carcasses lying exposed for a period of time while Abram waited for God to return
 - And during that time, unclean animals tried to pick at the sacrificed animals
 - But Abram stopped them
 - Do you see a beautiful picture emerging here?
 - The covenant God is extending to Abram also applies to Abram's descendants, his children to be called Israel
 - And there will be a delay in the Lord bringing the covenant into reality for Israel
 - Just as there was a delay in God beginning this ritual
 - And in the time while the delay occurs, Israel will be picked apart by vultures – so to speak
 - The vultures are a picture of Egypt

- But Abram was able to keep the vultures from destroying the covenant symbols thus allowing the covenant ritual to go forward
 - Likewise, Abram is the key to Israel returning to the land
 - Specifically, God's promises to Abram are the means to Israel being rescued from Egypt
 - We could say that Abram kept the vultures of Egypt from destroying Israel
 - Abram's covenant saved Israel
- Curiously, God says the delay is made necessary because the sin of the Amorites isn't complete
 - Literally, God is telling Abram that the Canaanite people in the land will be given a certain time for their sin to be complete or full
 - Once that time is reached, then God will use Israel to conquer and judge these people under Joshua
 - Therefore, Abram's descendants can't enter the land until that fullness is reached
 - Plus, the delay gives time for Abram's descendants to grow numerous
 - God will grow Israel while they are in Egypt, so that when they come out of slavery they are mighty enough to subdue the land
 - This second reason yields yet another picture for us
 - God tells Abram that his descendants can't occupy their land until a Gentile people are first given their full time under God's plan
 - And once that time is complete, then Abram's descendants will enter the land as promised
 - Today we can see this suggesting Israel's scattering during the time of the Church, when God is giving opportunity for Gentiles to repent

- And when that time is complete or full, then God will permit Abram's descendants to enter the land
- Finally, after that explanation, God initiated the covenant ritual for Abram and his descendants

[Gen. 15:17](#) It 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.

[Gen. 15:18](#) 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:

[Gen. 15:19](#) the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite

[Gen. 15:20](#) and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim

[Gen. 15:21](#) and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”

- God leaves Abram in the deep sleep and then proceeds to manifest Himself through these symbols
 - God shows Himself as smoke and fire
 - The text literally means “smoking pot” and “rising flame”
 - I believe these looked the same as those that led Israel in the desert
 - A column of smoke, round in shape like a pot
 - And a rising flame, like the kind that comes from a torch
 - As smoke and flame, God gives Himself a non-incarnate form
 - And then He proceeds to move through the pieces of meat by Himself
 - Normally, both parties would move through the meat signifying that both parties were obligated to keep the covenant
 - As men walked through the pieces of meat, they wore long robes that would become blood stained at the hem
 - This signified their acceptance of the covenant under penalty of death
 - But here, only God takes an obligation upon Himself
 - He alone is obligating Himself...an act of grace

- We see the connection with the number 5 and “grace” represented by the 5 animals
- The specific covenant promise in the ritual is spoken in vs.18-21
 - Abram’s descendants would receive the land between the Brook of Egypt and the Euphrates River
 - This is a span of land Israel has yet to own
 - And yet God has obligated Himself to this very promise
 - Clearly, the promise has yet to be fulfilled
 - For we are still in the period of delay, which God pictured through the time of waiting in the afternoon
 - But night fall will come upon the Earth
 - And in that period of darkness, Abram will protect his descendants, just as he protected the carcasses from the vultures
 - God will remember His promise to Abram, and the Lord will appear out of darkness to rescue Israel and bring Her into the promised land
- Remember I said earlier that covenants are established with rituals
 - But even before this ritual was conducted, God has already been acting for Abram
 - God acted first to bring Abraham out of Ur
 - That led to Abram’s faith in God and it was credited as righteousness
 - And finally, with faith came relationship in a covenant along with rituals to affirm that covenant...like our communion meal today