

Cutting a Covenant

Genesis 15:7-20

Abraham asks a heart rending question in our text this morning, a question with which every one of you can identify in many ways. It is a question addressed to God, in response to God's promises. The question is, "How shall I know?" the question might come to you, "How can I know God forgives me?" How can I know God will not forsake me or cast me away? How can I know that I will go to heaven when I die? How can I know I'm a Christian? How can I know that God will provide for my needs?

How shall I know? Abraham asked that question in response to God's specific promise.

v.1-2

Abraham believed God's word. He was justified—righteousness was reckoned to him, credited to him by faith. Yet he still needs a strengthened assurance. He has believed God's promise, and we studied last week that his faith "was accounted to him for righteousness." Yet immediately, he asks, "How shall I know?"

God gives him an amazing answer. He establishes a covenant with Abraham, and the ceremony used to establish that covenant gives us unparalleled insight into the meaning and significance of a covenant. But what is a covenant? A familiar Children's Catechism answers quite simply that a covenant is "an agreement between two or more persons." And that's true, and correct, but it doesn't go nearly far enough in describing the covenant that God established with his people.

In its most basic form, a covenant is a contract, an agreement.

For example, marriage is a covenant. A mortgage is a covenant. Church membership is a covenant. Business partnerships are covenants. Any legal or otherwise solemn contract can properly be called a covenant. Yet generally speaking, those covenants are negotiated. In business covenants, there is often an offer and a counter-offer before there is an agreement. Sometimes a lawyer or another mediator is needed in that negotiation.

But this covenant with God is different, because in this covenant, which is the covenant of grace through which God promises to save his people, God defines all the stipulations. God determines all the obligations, God declares all the penalties, all the rewards, everything. When God establishes his covenant with his people, there are not two parties at the table. There is no negotiation. In your relationship with God, you are never in a position to give him a counter-offer. No, God sovereignly administers his covenant with us.

In his relationship with Abraham, and with all of his people, God is the sovereign authority. He determines all the elements of the relationship. That is so obvious with Abraham. God had made his will so very clear.

Gen. 12:1 "Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you."

Also,

Gen. 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

So, the covenant of grace is not just an agreement between two or more persons. It is an agreement sovereignly

administered by God, it is a bond that joins together God and his people, and, as we'll see, it is a contract of life and death. It is a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.

This covenant established with Abraham is the same covenant God established immediately after the fall. That covenant, the covenant of grace, then revealed to Adam, was focused upon God's promise to send Jesus, the seed of the woman, to crush the head of Satan, the seed of the serpent. That covenant was further enlarged and explained in God's revelation to Noah, wherein God promised life, and protection from further universal judgment such as the flood.

Now, in perhaps the clearest revelation of the covenant of grace, God repeats that same covenant with Abraham as the father of all his elect people. The emphasis here is upon God's promise. God has given Abraham a two-fold promise, uncountable descendants and an unmeasurable land. That promise is repeated, prompting Abraham's question.

v.7-8

God answers that question with this covenant.

v.13

v.18

The idea is that,

I. GOD ESTABLISHES HIS COVENANT AS THE SURE SIGN OF HIS FAITHFULNESS TO FULFILL HIS PROMISE.

God is being so gracious here. He condescends to us, he comes to our level. In this case, he even utilizes a common, well-known human ritual for making that covenant. Everything God does is for Abraham's understanding. And ours.

We need that understanding. We need this explanation. And there is nothing wrong, nothing inappropriate, nothing sinful nor irreverent about Abraham's question. It's a question addressed to the sovereign Lord, to the Lord Jehovah, to Adonai Yahweh, to use the literal Hebrew. Abraham is addressing the one true and living God in whom he believes and through whom he has been justified by faith.

v.8

A. God's people instinctively seek God's assurance.

In this case, the specific answer gets overshadowed by the grandeur of the ceremony, but the answer is granted. The assurance is given.

v.18-21

Yes, indeed, Abraham had properly understood the promise. The fulfillment was sure and certain, clearly specified and unmistakably defined. God's assurance was given. And it was given in the form of revelation. Abraham is a good example for us that,

B. God's people instinctively seek God's revelation.

Notice how God's revelation was made evident.

v.12

That's an awesome experience. "Horror and great darkness." Indeed, such a direct revelation from God ought to be described with such reverence. Abraham surely was aware of the glory of God's presence, and the majesty of his justice, the horrible sentence inflicted upon covenant-breakers. In that context of terror, God gives Abraham the revelation,

v.13-16

Abraham now knows that he, himself, will not inherit the land.

During his lifetime, he would remain a stranger and an alien in a land not his own. He would endure the slavery and mistreatment. Yet he still looked in faith to the fulfillment of God's promise, even if it didn't come to his generation. If his descendants received the blessing, it was just as if he did! He personally would die and be buried, without inheriting the land, for the conquest of the land would await the fullness of time, the fullness of the sin of the Amorites to be exact.

Only when God's longsuffering was fully exhausted, only when justice could fully be measured, only then would God's people inherit the land. 400 years would pass. Four generations. Abraham accepted this revelation, kept his eyes upon the Lord, and remained faithful in his obedience. That is a perspective we do well to preserve, particularly when we so often long for instant gratification.

Abraham understood and believed God's promises, and accepted this covenant as the sure sign of God's faithfulness. But what did the sign mean? What exactly happened when God established the covenant? It's a pretty descriptive ceremony, one which was patterned after other civilizations of that day, particularly the Chaldeans. This was how they entered into covenant with one another. Instead of sitting at a table with a lawyer, or instead of appearing before a judge, this is how the covenants of that day were instituted,

v.9-11

And then, v.17

So what does all of that mean? I'll answer with one word, then explain further. The one word, justice. Those animals represented justice. Walking between the pieces of animals represented justice. In this ceremony,

II. GOD DEMONSTRATES THE DEMANDS OF JUSTICE UPON THOSE WHO BREAK HIS COVENANT.

Keep this in mind. The covenant included sanctions of justice. The covenant included stipulations about what would happen if the requirements of the covenant were violated.

We're used to such stipulations in covenants we make. If you don't pay your credit card bill by a certain time each month, interest is added to your account. Penalties. If you stop paying your mortgage payments or your car payments, a procedure is outlined whereby the bank or mortgage company takes possession, called repossession. Those are covenant stipulations of justice. When you enter a covenant, you submit to them. In the Bible, they are called the curses of the covenant.

A. The animals cut in two represent the curse upon those who break the covenant.

The animals were cut in two. Pretty gruesome.

v.9-10

Take those words literally. When the people of that day entered a covenant, they cut animals in half, a symbolic demonstration of the curse they accepted upon themselves if they would violate the covenant. It was the animals cut in two that fully signified the covenant, much like our signature today. Notice the definitive words of,

v.18

"The Lord made a covenant with Abram." Now, more Hebrew lessons. The word MADE a covenant really means "CUT" a covenant. The very word used emphasizes that this cutting in two of animals is the essence of what the covenant is.

A covenant, by definition, includes sanctions for breaking it. That's called justice. In this case, the sanctions are obvious. To

be cut in two was to be killed, it is to sacrifice your own life. The ultimate curse of breaking the covenant which God has established with his people is death! And the horrors of that death are described by what happens in,

v.11

Now, that imagery is used frequently in Scripture. Dead carcasses eaten by birds of prey. Nothing can more deeply signify the ultimate sanction of God's justice, nothing more deeply represents the horror of the justice of death.

Jeremiah gives us examples of this sort of language, Jer. 34:18 "And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— 19 the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— 20 I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth."

Also, Jer. 7:33 "The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away. 34 Then I will cause to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. For the land shall be desolate."

The imagery is also used frequently for wicked kings, one example among many, 1Kgs. 21:23 "And concerning Jezebel the LORD also spoke, saying, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.' 24 The

dogs shall eat whoever belongs to Ahab and dies in the city, and the birds of the air shall eat whoever dies in the field."

The idea is that the ultimate fate of the covenant breaker would be not only that his body would be slain, but that it would be devoured by the wild birds. Woe to the covenant breaker who once has pledged himself to death!

In this ceremony, the animals cut in two represent the curse upon those who break the covenant.

But one other thing that is essential to recognize. In cutting a covenant, those entering into the agreement walk between the pieces, thus signifying their willingness to submit to those sanctions if they break the agreement. And only when the parties walk between the pieces can it be said that the covenant has been established. We have that here.

v.17

B. The ones walking between the pieces personally accept the consequences of breaking the covenant.

In this case, the consequences are death. So it has always been in God's relationship with his people, going right back to the first covenant God made with Adam as the head of the human race,

Gen. 2:16 "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

That is why I say that a covenant is a bond in blood. It is a contract which is guaranteed by your very life. And that is why I think the mortgage illustration is helpful. A mortgage doesn't require your life if you violate the terms, but it does impose severe

sanctions and penalties. In terms of the house, there is a death sentence. You violate the mortgage, you lose the house. Those are the terms of the mortgage covenant.

In God's covenant with his people, shown here with Abraham, our blood is the pledge and guarantee of our faithfulness. In the days of Abraham, your very life was required if you fell short of the requirements, and you accepted that sanction by walking between the pieces of dead animals. In doing so, with every obvious awareness of the seriousness of your actions, you were saying, "If I break this covenant, may the fate of these animals come upon me. If I break this covenant, may my own body be cut in two and my own life sacrificed.

But now I want you to notice the most spectacular thing about this covenant ceremony. I want to emphasize something I've only skipped over thus far, but something you may have noticed. In this covenant between God and his people, established as a promise to Abraham, who walks between the pieces? Who accepts the covenant curses and sanctions upon himself? Who accepts the curses of the covenant upon himself? Who takes that oath of self-condemnation, "May it be to me as it is to these animals if I break the covenant."

Who does that? If this were an ordinary covenant, between two men, both men would walk between the pieces. Both men would accept the consequences of breaking the covenant. But we see something else here.

III. GOD GRACIOUSLY ACCEPTS THE CURSE OF THE COVENANT UPON HIMSELF.

God alone accepts the curse of the covenant upon himself. He does not require Abraham to do likewise. There is no greater definition and demonstration of grace!

v.17

That smoking oven and burning torch were a revelation of God. God's glory and power, accurately symbolized by fire.

A. God alone walked between the pieces.

What does that mean? It means that God will not inflict the curses of the covenant upon Abraham if he disobeys, namely the condemnation of death!

That was NOT the case in the first covenant made with Adam, a relationship our Confession of Faith calls a covenant of works. It isn't that Adam worked in order to enter a relationship with God, but rather that he would receive the blessings or the curses of the covenant depending upon his works. And the simple stipulation was that if he obeyed God, he would continue to live. If he disobeyed God, he would die. And before the fall, there was no provision made for blessing in the event of disobedience.

That changes in this covenant of grace, for God alone accepts the curse upon himself. The curse of death. And so, the idea is that if God would break the covenant, which, of course, he never did and never would, he would condemn himself. AND, if man would break the covenant, God would also suffer the condemnation himself.

You know what happened. Man did break the covenant. We continue to break the covenant. So how can we say that God would condemn himself?

I hope you know the answer to that question? How would God condemn himself for the sin of man? The answer is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the second person of the trinity, the son of God, was condemned by God the father, for the sin of mankind.

The covenant curse which we deserved fell upon Jesus. And fulfillment of that oath of self-destruction fell upon Jesus.

As we read in,

Isa. 53:4 “Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was any deceit in His mouth. 10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.”

Jesus Christ satisfied the demands of the covenant, not only by obeying all of its stipulations for us, so that his righteousness could be credited to us. But even more than that, by enduring the curse of the covenant on our behalf, as a substitute.

Scripture calls that an atoning sacrifice, or in the older language, a propitiation. That word refers to the demands of justice, covenant sanctions and penalties for disobedience. Jesus met those demands, paid the penalty in full, and satisfied all of God’s wrath. This covenant ceremony in Genesis 15

therefore shows us that,

B. God alone provides the atoning sacrifice required by the covenant.

And that atoning sacrifice is God himself. In the person of Jesus Christ.

Let me tie all together even a little more neatly for you. In the OT, the blood of those animals cut in two is called the blood of the covenant. In the ceremony of Exodus 24, there is no walking between the pieces, but the blood of the animals killed is sprinkled on the altar and called, the blood of the covenant.

Ex.24:5 “Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. 6 And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” 8 And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”

In Jesus, we see the blood of the covenant again. We see the curse of the covenant fulfilled, for just as the blood of those animals was poured out in their death, so was his. And when inaugurating the new covenant, Jesus specifically says, as he hands the passover cup to his disciples,

Matt. 26:28 “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Luke gives us these words,

Luke 22:20 “Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”

So all of what we have studied in Genesis 15 has great relevance to what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper. How glorious it is that we no longer have to kill animals and shed their blood. Jesus' blood has been shed once for all.

How glorious to realize that we are no longer subject to the condemning curse of the covenant, for the condemnation of God's wrath was poured out on Jesus. His body was given for you. His blood was shed for you. And yet, you may still be asking, or thinking, or feeling, "How can I know?"

How can I know God forgives me of my sin? How can I know God loves me? How can I know I am a Christian? How can I know I will go to heaven when I die?

The answer, dear friends, lies in the truth of the gospel, a truth demonstrated by God himself. God alone walked between those pieces of the animals cut in two. With the same exact meaning for us today, Jesus speaks of his blood, as the "blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The curse of the covenant has been satisfied.

Is. 53:6 "All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."