



+ **YOU**

Summer 2024
Promises We Can Count On

Sermon Title: A Different Kind of Covenant

To be used with Session 5: God's Promise of a New Covenant

Scripture: Genesis 15: 7-16, Exodus 34:6-7, 2 Tim. 2:11-13

Connection with Bible Study: To complement the Bible study "God's Promise of a New Covenant" this sermon will answer the question, what makes God's covenant different? We discovered in our Bible study groups that God will establish a new covenant, unlike previous covenants. So this sermon will first provide a definition of a covenant. Then, using the example of God's covenant with Abraham, it will show that unlike a covenant between two human beings, God's covenant doesn't depend on us to fulfill our end of it. Because God can't deny Himself, His covenant still stands even when we are faithless.

Introduction: How many of you have agreed to some kind of covenant at some point in your life. Chances are, you have, even if you didn't call it that. The dictionary definition of covenant as "a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action." [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/covenant>] The "under seal" part means that the covenant it is typically notarized, or at least witnessed. These days, we most often hear about "covenants" in connection with a church that asks you to sign the membership covenant when you join the church, or a Homeowner's Association that wants you to keep your trash can in the backyard.

The Bible talks about covenants frequently. God made covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:11), Abraham (our text for this morning), Moses (Ex. 19:1-8), and David (2 Sam. 7) to name a few.

God's covenants are different. What makes them so? This morning, we will find out.

1. The Biggest Difference (Gen. 15:7-16).

There is a strange (and fairly gruesome) ancient near east custom described in Genesis 15. When two parties made a covenant in ancient times, they would ratify the covenant by slaughtering an animal (or several animals) and split the carcasses in half. Then both parties would walk between the pieces. The symbolism has become obscure over the centuries, but essentially each party was saying, "May the gods make me as one of these carcasses if I break this covenant." (Fun fact, there is a theory that this is where the idiom "cutting a deal" comes from.)

But Abraham never walked between the pieces. He was asleep (v 12)! So the only one that ratified the covenant was God! Verse 17 tells us that "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces." This represented the manifest presence of God. God made a

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covenant with Himself to make a great nation out of Abram. If you look closely, there wasn't even anything God asked Abram to do on his end.

2. A Covenant of Love (Ex. 34:6-7).

Of all the covenants you will be a part of in your life, the one that most closely resembles God's idea of a covenant is marriage. It checks all the boxes of a standard covenant: an agreement between two parties (a man and a woman), usually under seal (surrounded by witnesses) especially for the performance of an action (living together and starting a family). But unlike your agreement with your HOA, a marriage covenant is based on love.

God's covenant is based on love as well. There is a difficult-to-translate Hebrew word used to describe God's love in the Old Testament. The word is *chesed*, and it is used 248 times in the Old Testament, almost always in reference to God's love for us. It's how God introduced Himself to Moses when Moses asked God to show him His glory in Exodus 34. There's not a precise English equivalent, so we get "steadfast love," "unfailing love," and "lovingkindness," in various translations. Personally, I'm partial to "covenant love." It's a love that is protected and safeguarded by a promise made. Regardless of someone's unloveliness or unworthiness, the Lover is committed to "*chesed*" still loves.

The closest thing we have to relate to *chesed* is the covenant of marriage. A good marriage protects and sustains romantic love because it is protected by *chesed* (covenant) love. And even that falls short because human beings break promises and covenants all the time.

3. We can trust God's Covenant (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

Paul reminded Timothy of the lyrics to one of the praise choruses that was apparently popular at the church in Ephesus. It was a hymn about a covenant. Look at all the if/then language: If we died with Him, we will live with Him. If we endure, we will reign. If we deny Him, He will deny us. All standard, covenant language. If you do your part, I will do my part.

But then Paul reminds Timothy of the last verse: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself" (v. 13). "Faithless" and "God" cannot exist in the same sentence! It is the nature of God to be faithful.

Conclusion: There is a reason Abraham was in a deep sleep when the blazing torch and smoking firepot passed between the carcasses in Genesis 15. God knew then and He knows now that human beings will never be able to hold up their end of a bargain. So He doesn't give them an end to hold up. For Abraham, the promise to make of him a great nation required nothing on Abram's part to fulfill. And for us, the new covenant of grace was sealed by the work Jesus did on the cross.

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