

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 5

REDEMPTION: THE OLD COVENANT

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INTRODUCTION

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Genesis presents the creation of *Adam* (Hebrew: “mankind”) as taking place in two stages: first, God *forms* Adam out of the dust of the earth, and then he *breathes* life into him.

Man rebels against God and introduces disorder into his creation. The result is a human society which is separated from God and from nature and from itself, divided within itself. Everyone born into that human society is alienated from God and nature and others and is divided within himself.

Human beings, as they are born, do not know what they are for, what their *end*, or purpose, is.

Fallen human society gives individual persons distorted moral values. The moral values of society are distorted because the people who make up that society are estranged from God and are confused about right and wrong. This is a vicious circle.

But God does not simply erase the first creation which “went wrong.” Instead, like a master artist, he redeems the “mistake” by making use of the result, weaving it into the fabric of his new creation. In this way even the rebellion becomes something precious through its consequences.

Genesis tells of God’s setting out through the slow and painful process of history to *form* a new mankind out of the remnant of the old, into which, in the fullness of time, he would *breathe* his life anew.

The nation of Israel is formed by God to be the new Adam into which, at Pentecost, He will breathe his Holy Spirit (Hebrew *ruach* means “spirit”, as well as “wind” and “breath”).

The rest of the Bible is the story of the re-creation, the redemption of mankind.

THE EPIC OF THE PATRIARCHS [Genesis 12 – 50]

The story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), and Joseph begins in legend and moves to the threshold of history. These figures are both individuals and symbols of the tribe. It is not always possible to tell which.

The Hebrews invented the study of history. But their emphasis is not simply on events, or raw facts, but rather on the meaning of what happens. For them, what happens is the result of either the *active* or *permissive* will of God.

Abraham is chosen by God, and this calling, together with his response in trust, is the basis of

the Hebrews' relationship with God.

At first the story reads as if it is about one man and his wife— a “mom and pop” operation. But in chapter 14 of Genesis we discover that his household is so large that it contains 318 fighting men which he sends to the aid of his kinsman, Lot.

In Chapter 17, because he is to be father of a multitude of nations, his original name *Abram*, “father,” is changed to *Abraham*, “big father.”

Abraham has two children, the first by his servant woman, Hagar, and the second by his wife, Sarai (whose name becomes Sarah). The junior son, *Isaac*, becomes the inheritor of the promise.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a pattern in which God chooses unlikely characters to be the agent or link in the process, such as younger sons and women who would not be expected to have children.

Abraham is a *sheik* (Arabic: “judge”, “elder”), the founder of a tribe. Theirs is a world of murder and robbery. And so whoever can found and preserve a tribe is a hero, the Father of his Country.

From time to time, such a sheik will lead his tribe in battle, but his continuing function is to keep the peace and preserve the unity and life of the tribe. In that sense he “judges” his people. The Old Testament Book of Judges is the Book of the Sheiks of the Tribes of Israel.

Their morality is tribal morality. Thus, “Thou shalt not kill” means thou shalt not kill another Israelite.

At the basis of the tribal unity is the common meal. One does not eat with an outsider. To admit someone to your meal is to accept him as your kinsman and to extend to him the protection of your moral code.

Abraham begat Isaac; Isaac begat Jacob – whose name was changed to Israel; Israel begat 12 sons, the youngest of which is Benjamin and the next to the youngest is Joseph.

The story of Joseph is called “The Little Gospel of the Old Testament.” It has striking parallels with the story of Jesus.

Israel is a father who has a favorite son. He sends the favorite son to see how his brothers are doing. They have been jealous of him for a long time. As they see him approaching in the distance, one of them, Judah, proposes seizing him—which they do. Then they sell him to some merchants who are headed to Egypt *for twenty pieces of silver!* And they take away his many-colored coat.

He is taken down into Egypt, where he is put in a dungeon with two other malefactors. One of them is saved on the third day and the other is not. Eventually, Joseph is raised from the dungeon and becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt sitting at the right hand of Pharaoh the king.

Pharaoh puts him over all his kingdom, because he successfully interprets his nightmares. Those dreams foretell seven years of plenty for that part of the world followed by seven

years of famine.

When the famine arrives, his brothers come from Canaan to buy grain. They appear before Joseph, who reveals his identity to them and says, “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt . . . God sent me before you to preserve a remnant for you on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors....you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...”

The story of Joseph reflects the invasion of Egypt by Bedouin tribesmen of Semitic origin, which resulted in a Semitic dynasty in Egypt. Some of them settled in the Nile Delta in “the land of Goshen.” The children of Israel wound up spending “400 years” in Egypt.

Note: Terms like “40” and “400” occur over and over in the Bible. They are generalizations.

Four hundred years might actually have been 217. Forty years might have been actually 27. But there are two intervals of 40 years which are quite exact:

First, the 40 years leading up to the event during which Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of the temple and their captivity by Babylon;

Second, the interval between the resurrection of Jesus in 30 A.D., and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Eventually, there arises “a pharaoh who *knows* not Joseph” – that is, there is a change of dynasty – and the Israelites are reduced to slavery and forced to work on public construction projects.

The new dynasty is insecure and decides to eliminate any chance of an uprising. So it is decreed that all the boy babies are to be killed. And that brings us to *Moses*.

MOSES [Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy]

With Moses, we cross the threshold of written history. The Jewish understanding of what he said and did and what it meant is based on the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books are referred to, variously, as the “Pentateuch” (Greek: *pentateuchos*, consisting of five books), the “Torah” (Hebrew, “Law”), “Moses,” and “The Gift of God.”

Moses is a Hebrew child who has been adopted by the royal family and raised at court. But his wet nurse and nanny is a Hebrew and, unknown to the court, is actually his natural mother.

Moses grows up enjoying the rights and privileges of an Egyptian prince, but he is soft on Hebrews.

On one occasion he kills an Egyptian who is abusing a Hebrew, but almost at once the story begins to leak out. For fear of his life he runs away. He winds up out on the frontier in the land of Midian.

He becomes foreman for Jethro (high priest and king of Midian), sort of a combination of the mayor and local preacher. He marries Jethro’s daughter and spends 40 years there learning the ways of desert life.

One day he has an awe-full experience. He comes upon a bush which is on fire and yet does not burn up. And out of the burning bush comes a voice which claims to be the ancestral God of the Hebrews. He tells Moses to go back to Egypt and negotiate with Pharaoh on behalf of the Hebrews.

Moses asks the name of the one who is speaking to him. The voice says “Yahweh” (JHVH), which in Hebrew means “I Am What I Am,” “I Will Be What I Will Be,” “I Am He Who Is,” or simply “I AM.”

I AM tells Moses that his brother Aaron will be his spokesman.

Moses returns to Egypt and organizes the Hebrews. Moses tells them that I AM commands that, on a particular night, every Hebrew family is to kill a lamb, smear the blood around the entrance of the house, eat up the meat completely, and then leave in the middle of the night.

Which they do. And they arrive at the edge of the *Red Sea* with the army of Pharaoh in hot pursuit. Actually it was probably the *Sea of Reeds*—the swampy area where the Suez Canal would later be built.

That night, God causes a mighty wind to arise and force the waters back so that they are able to walk across. As the enemy starts to cross after them, the waters rush back in and drown the Egyptian soldiers with their horses and chariots. And the Hebrews wind up safe on the other shore.

Moses proceeds to organize them as a Bedouin tribe, and then he takes them to Mt. Sinai.

On the way, they meet and have a skirmish with people called Amalekites who are on the way in to invade Egypt.

At Mt. Sinai, he tells them that I AM has brought them out into the desert to make a *covenant* with them, that is a deal, a contract. The terms of the deal are summed up in the ten commandments written on two slabs of stone.

The people agree to the covenant.

To ratify it, Moses builds an altar, sacrifices some oxen from which he drains the blood into a bucket. Part of the blood he pours out on the altar. And after reading the terms of the covenant to the people, he sprinkles the rest of the blood on the people. This gives them a blood relationship with I AM (Yahweh).

In time, the Israelites become convinced that God’s proper name was too holy to be pronounced. So they develop the custom of substituting the word *Adonai* meaning “lord.” In English when the word “lord” refers to the divine name it is usually written in all capitals: “LORD.”

NOTE: Written Hebrew has no vowel symbols, only consonants. That is why the Divine Name is written JHVH. Our old fashioned rendering of it as “Jehovah” came from inserting the vowel sounds from *Adonai* into the consonants as a guess at how to pronounce it. Linguistic scholars now believe it should be more like “Yahweh.”

AN UNPRECEDENTED EVENT IN HUMAN HISTORY

At Mt. Sinai for the first time in history a people *chooses* to worship a God which is other than the God of the locality and is also a God which they believe has chosen them and adopted them.

More importantly, religion moves beyond the sacrifice of *possessions* to include also the sacrifice, the offering, of *behavior* as well.

THE COVENANT

The contract with God has two parts:

The *Ritual Law*

The Hebrews promise to worship the LORD according to the divinely revealed formula, and to worship no other gods.

The LORD promises to meet them in their worship, to keep rendezvous with them, to be a God near at hand and not far off.

The *Moral Law*

For their part, the Hebrews agree to treat each other in accordance with God's Law.

For his part, the LORD promises to bless them, to overcome their enemies, and to lead them into a land of their own, the *Promised land*—the land of Canaan.

Note: The covenant is *corporate* rather than *individual*. It is between God and the *entire people*. Membership in the covenant people is the precondition for receiving the benefits of the covenant. The disobedience (sin) of one person absolves God of his responsibility to the whole nation. The whole group acquires guilt from the sin of one of its members.

Moses sends twelve men to spy out the land of Canaan to the north. All report that the land is wonderful, but only two of them say they are able to conquer it, Joshua and Caleb. The other ten say they cannot because there are giants there.

I AM then says they will have to spend 40 years, an entire generation, out in the wilderness before they can enter Canaan — that is until a new generation which has known only desert life will have grown up. During that time, they camp around the oasis of Kadesh-barnea.

When the time comes to enter Canaan they move over to the east side of the Jordan river and camp around Shittim in the land of Moab. Only Moses and the two optimistic spies, Caleb and Joshua, are still alive.

Then I AM takes Moses up to the top of Mt. Nebo and lets him see the Promised Land, but tells him he will not enter it. He tells him Joshua will lead the people in. Moses dies there in the land of Moab.

THE BATTLE OF JERICHO [Joshua: 1 – 8]

The spot chosen for the invasion is where the Jordan River is easiest to cross – at its southern end where it flows into the Dead Sea, near the walled Canaanite city of Jericho.

As they are beginning to cross the Jordan, suddenly the water stops flowing and they are able to walk across. Actually that sort of thing has happened since then, from time to time, as a result of the bank upstream caving in and temporarily blocking the river's flow.

At the place where they cross, they erect a monument of twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes.

“On that day, God exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.” [Joshua 4:14]

Their first campsite in the promised land is at a spot named *Gilgal*. The last place they camped before entering was named *Shittim*. The phrase “from Shittim to Gilgal” is frequently used in the Bible to refer to the event of their entrance into the Holy Land. It was their “Plymouth Rock.”

Outside the walls of Jericho, in the middle of the night, Joshua has an *awesome* experience. He encounters a man with a drawn sword.

Joshua says to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?”

He answers, “No, but as the commander of the army of the Lord, I have now come.”
Joshua prostrates himself on the ground and asks, “What does my lord bid his servant?”

He says to Joshua, “Put off your shoes from your feet; for the place where you stand is holy.”

And Joshua did so. And that is the end of the incident. There is no further reference to it in the entire Old Testament. Later on we will come back to it. [Joshua 5:13–15]

At God's command Joshua tells the people that the entire city is to be “devoted” to the Lord; only Rahab, the harlot who had befriended their spies, is to be spared. All silver and gold and all vessels of bronze and iron are to go into the priestly treasury. Everything else, including every living creature, is to be destroyed.

So “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls come tumblin' down.”

The next step is to attack the town of Ai nearby. But they are defeated. And Joshua is convinced that this means that someone has disobeyed and kept some spoils. So he has an investigation made, and it turns out that a man named *Achan* has kept some gold and silver and two beautiful garments from Babylon buried under the floor of his tent.

So, in order to get right with God again and be “100% obedient”, the people lynch Achan by stoning: that is, they throw rocks at him until he is buried under a huge pile. Then they attack Ai once more, and this time they are successful.

THE CONQUEST [Judges]

The next “400 years” were spent conquering, one by one, all the walled cities of the Canaanites. This is known as the period of the Judges.

The Hebrews had to learn how to practice agriculture. And the only ones who could teach them were their Canaanite neighbors. “Scientific” agriculture involved offering sacrifices to fertility gods and practicing sympathetic magic.

The theory was that things grow because the male fertility god, Baal, has sex with the fertility goddess, Ashtoreth.

The people encouraged and stimulated them to do that by the following technique: Each spring the ground where they wanted things to grow was poked with a stick, and then some of the fruit of last year’s crop was scattered on the broken ground. This was really plowing and planting, but it was thought of as offering sacrifices to the fertility gods.

But remember, according to the contract with God, the worship of other gods was forbidden. So when Hebrews do that they are guilty of apostasy, infidelity to the LORD, what the prophets would later refer to as “whoring after strange gods”.

On a number of occasions, after a fling at “scientific agriculture”, the Hebrews found themselves under attack from other Bedouin tribes as well as from the Canaanites. And they would be beaten.

After their defeat, some judge would rise up and tell them that their defeat came because they had been unfaithful. And if they would only repent, God would give them victory. So they did, and he did.

Later, as they thought about it, they saw this pattern in their history: First, a period of peace, which was followed by apostasy, which was followed by catastrophe, followed by repentance, followed by a God–chosen leader who saved them, followed by another period of peace, followed by apostasy, etc. . . .

This pattern continued for over a thousand years, until the time of Jesus.

THE UNITED MONARCHY (1020 – 920 B.C.) [I & II Samuel, I Kings, I, II Chron: 1–10]

The last of the judges is the first of the prophets—Samuel.

The people beg him to give them a king like their neighbors, and finally he gives in.

The king’s name is Saul. The kingdom is taken away from him because he keeps some sheep for sacrifice when Samuel has told him to “devote” to God all of the conquered Amalekite city. Samuel makes the point that obedience (the sacrifice of conduct) is more important than sacrifice (of things).

Saul is succeeded by David who makes them the most powerful nation in that part of the world.

David is succeeded by Solomon who adds greatly to their wealth, but he also commits flagrant

apostasy by marrying many foreign wives and building temples to their pagan gods in Jerusalem.

Solomon also “enslaves” the people to build public buildings the way Pharaoh had done.

He is succeeded by his son, *Rehoboam*, who increases the slavery of the people. A rebellion results.

The ten northern tribes secede under the leadership of a man named *Jeroboam*.

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM (920 - 721, 586 B.C.) [I & II Kings, II Chron.: 11–36]

For the next 200 years, there are two nations instead of one. The northern kingdom is called Israel. Its capital is first at Shechem and then at Samaria. The southern kingdom is known as Judah, and its capital continues to be Jerusalem.

Jeroboam, king of Israel, builds two temples to compete with the one in Jerusalem: one at Dan in the extreme north, the other at Bethel about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. In each he places an idol, a calf of gold, to represent the LORD (JHVH).

But a golden calf is already a symbol of the fertility god Baal. And remember, that was what the Israelites were worshipping when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Law.

Two hundred years later, in 721 B.C., Israel is conquered by the Assyrian Empire, the majority of the people are deported, and new settlers are brought in to replace them. The deported Israelites never return; these are the famous “ten lost tribes of Israel”.

In 586 B.C., the Babylonian Empire, which has succeeded the Assyrian, invades the southern kingdom, Judah. The temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and most of the people are carried off into exile in Babylon. Only some of the poorest farmers are left behind.

THE EXILE [Jeremiah, Ezekiel]

The Jews – the people of Judah – remain in Babylonian exile for 50 years. They believe their catastrophe has happened because of their national apostasy. They no longer have the temple as the center of their corporate life.

They develop the determination to keep God’s Law and never become apostate again, and so under the leadership of men who are experts in the Law, called *rabbis*, they meet every Sabbath in groups to study the Law, sing Psalms, and pray. This is the origin of the *synagogue* (Greek: “congregation”). It will become the center of their corporate life.

In 538 B.C., Cyrus, king of the Persians, who has conquered the Babylonians, permits the Jews to return to Judah and start rebuilding Jerusalem.

JUDAH AFTER THE EXILE [Ezra, Nehemiah]

The rebuilt temple cannot compare with the splendor of the one that Solomon had built.

They are never really free of foreign domination again, in spite of moments of rebellion.

After the Persian Empire comes the empire of Philip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great.

Then Alexander dies in 323 BC. And the eastern part of his empire is carved up by his generals: Seleucus gets Syria and Ptolemais gets Egypt. At first the Holy Land is ruled by the Ptolemies and then the Seleucids get control of it in 198 BC.

The Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, tries to force the Jews to merge the worship of the LORD with the worship of Zeus. Finally, in 167 BC, he seizes the Temple, dedicates it to Zeus, and installs an altar to Zeus along with an image of him. That altar and its image are referred to as *The Abomination of Desolation* (a pun in Hebrew on Zeus's title, "Lord of Heaven").

In 163 B.C., Judas Maccabeus, a member of the high priestly family, leads a successful revolt against the Syrians. And for the next 100 years they enjoy relative independence.

Then they fall under the control of Rome, which places over them the half-Jewish *Herod* family who come from Edom (Idumaea) just to the south of Judaea.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE OLD COVENANT

With the establishment of the Old Covenant at Mt. Sinai, the "ante goes up." The basis of right relationship with fundamental reality is no longer limited to the sacrifice of *possessions*. It now requires the sacrifice, the offering, of *conduct*.

Furthermore, the right relationship, *righteousness*, is not an individual matter but a corporate one. The Covenant is a contract between the LORD and the nation—a closed-shop contract. In theory, when the nation fails to produce 100% obedience, the deal is off.

The story of Achan at Jericho illustrates this approach to righteousness:

While they are 100% obedient, the LORD gives the Hebrews victory at Jericho. But because of the sin of one man, *Achan*, they are defeated when they try to conquer Ai.

The only thing to do is to purge themselves of the "one rotten apple in the barrel." When they have done that, they are 100% again. And then they are victorious at Ai because now the LORD is on their side.

THE CORPORATE NATURE OF GUILT

Is God fair to hold the sin of Achan against the whole people?

Well, where does Achan get the notion that it is all that important to have the fine clothes and the gold and silver?

He gets it from the same place that the third grader gets the notion that if he comes to school with ten dollars he has sneaked from his mother's purse and buys candy for all his friends, he

will be a big man on the playground. He gets it from his peer group, his *society*.

Imagine the scene: There is a big bonfire in the middle of the ruins of Jericho. Men are bringing everything that will burn and piling it on the fire. Not far away the priests are receiving all the gold and silver jewelry, etc., which will be melted down and will go into their cultic treasury.

As this goes on, the men who have won the battle look on. They have risked their lives, and they are not getting anything out of it. And they grumble, “I don’t see why we couldn’t have those fine clothes to replace the rags we have lived in for forty years. Look at those damn priests collecting all that loot!”

Every one of them would really like to do what Achan did. In their heart of hearts they are just like him. He does what they would like to do.

After President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, the city kept trying for years to rid itself of the image of “the city that kills Presidents”. And it was hard to do.

It was reported that on the day he was shot, when the teacher in a second-grade classroom announced that the president had just been shot, the children cheered out loud.

The city fathers denied it but undoubtedly it was true. Those children had heard their daddies say at the supper table, “Somebody ought to shoot that so and so!” And somebody had. Of course they cheered.

It took the city of Dallas at least a decade to get over its neurosis.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The President is a father figure. And deep in his heart, at some point in his life, everyone has wished his father dead ... except you and me, of course.

The reason you and I are excluded is because you and I have *repressed* it, forgotten it.

A friend of mine with a large family had this experience: On one occasion, when his children had been unusually naughty, he lined them up and gave them a tongue lashing. When he was done, his five-year-old son pointed his finger at him and said, “Pow!”

If not father, then boss, policeman, school teacher, priest, etc.

But we also have an ingrained, ancient conviction that we ought to honor and respect Daddy.

There is a little Lee Harvey Oswald (assuming he is the one who did it) hiding down in the dungeon of my sub-conscious and I don’t intend to let him get out. I know I am not like that. I really am not! — Am I?

When the real assassin gets loose and shoots the President, I can hear the chains rattling in my subconscious. And to prove to myself I am not really like that, I become incensed at the real Lee Harvey Oswald.

When the mass-murderer Caryl Chessman was finally captured, the public would have lynched him if it had had the chance. But he became a jailhouse lawyer and got his execution postponed for years. When he finally was executed, there was a great outcry of sympathy. Thousands of letters were sent to the governor pleading for his life.

What caused the change in public sentiment? We identify with him, that's what.

Jesus said, "He that hateth his brother is a murderer." That does not need explanation to the man who remembers how much he hated to fight when he was a boy. And the bullies knew it, so they picked on him. And one day he was pushed too far. Then he went berserk and picked up a two-by-four and tried to kill his tormentors.

REPRESSION

My murderer, my adulterer is repressed. When someone comes along and does openly what I dare only fantasize about, I demonstrate how much I hate this part of myself by aggressive, hostile action against the criminal. But months later I may find myself identifying with him: "There but for the grace of God go I."

When the Hebrews lynched Achan, they performed a human sacrifice which purged their *sense* of guilt. He became a sin offering. The only trouble is that it doesn't work. Achan is only repressed.

That lynching occurred 1400 years before Christ; 1400 years later the *Law* would say that adulterers and those who commit sacrilege, like Achan, are to be put to death by stoning.

THE PROPHETS

From the time of Samuel on, the primary way in which God spoke to the people of the Covenant was through inspired men known as *prophets*.

The prophets were not so much predictors, *foretelling* the future, as proclaimers, telling *forth* God's will for his people. They also both criticized the nation and held up a vision of what God wanted to give them.

At times their prophecy took the form of saying that some dire catastrophe was about to befall them because of the evil, that is the self-destructiveness, of their ways.

When the prophets spoke, they used powerful imagery. They never spoke in abstractions. They were not theoreticians. They were not theologians.

At times, they went beyond spoken imagery and acted out their message. For example, to dramatize his message that the nation of Israel was being unfaithful, like an adulterous wife, the prophet Hosea actually married a harlot. And when she bore children, he gave them symbolic names like "Not Pitied" and "Not My People."

JESUS THE PROPHET

Among other things, Jesus was the prophet par excellence. He proclaimed God's message in

parables, in the concrete imagery of stories. On occasion he went beyond words and acted out God's message in other ways—which we will examine next time.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Where do the values you live by come from?

Do they come from your communities?

What are your primary communities?

To what extent are your communities formed by God?

If not by God, by what or by whom?