

Keeping the Covenant

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Date: 25 June 2017

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[0:00] There's a proverb that many of us live by. That's a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. You guys have heard of this. And this 16th century proverb predates really the supposedly revolutionary findings of cognitive psychologists of today.

Like Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, they published their findings in a popular book called Thinking Fast and Slow. And they talk about loss aversion. People hate to lose things that they already have.

In fact, they would much rather give up the prospect of gaining \$5 so that they never have to worry about losing the \$5 they already have. In fact, they say that loss is twice as effective a motivator as gain.

So the prospect of gaining \$10 more is the same motivator for someone as the fear of losing the \$5 that they already have. So that proverb is actually quite accurate.

A bird in the hand, one bird is worth two in the bush. And this partly explains why we have such a hard time living by faith. Because we like to live by sight by what we already have in our hands, by what we already know and see around us.

[1:12] And we like to keep things in the here and now. And we don't want to live with faith, looking ahead to what God has for us in the future. But in God's economy, he calls us to forsake everything to follow him.

We saw how God told Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father's household to follow God to where he is calling him. And in God's economy, what we gain is not just twice as good as what we leave behind.

It's infinitely better. It's an everlasting possession, he says to Abraham. And so from Abraham's example, we learn here that we are, as God's people, to keep God's covenant by believing in and living according to his promises.

That's the main idea of this passage. And I'll talk about it in three points. First is going to be covenant inaugurated, covenant started. Second is going to be covenant transgressed, violated.

And then third is going to be covenant confirmed. It's going to be chapters 15, 16, and 17. So first, covenant inaugurated. God begins his covenant with Abraham. Verse 1 begins this way.

[2:16] After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. So the phrase after these things is referring to what happened at the end of chapter 14.

What happened is that Abraham rescued his relative Lot and defeated the king's ally with Sher de Laomir. And he did that successfully.

And as he came to King Melchizedek and King of Sodom, King of Sodom offered to be his patron, his benefactor. I will bless you. But Abraham, knowing that God had said he would be his benefactor, because God had promised Abraham, I will bless you, he refuses King of Sodom's offer.

So we don't know. The narrative doesn't tell us what he felt afterward. But the fact that God now appears to him after these things to comfort him and tell him not to fear suggests that maybe there was some trepidation on Abraham's part.

Or maybe he's feeling some regret for refusing the loot that the king of Sodom offered. Or maybe he's feeling, oh, maybe I really should have taken him up on that offer. It would be nice to have the king of Sodom to have my back. But God comes to him and he says to him, fear not, Abraham.

[3 : 28] I am your shield. Your reward shall be great, very great. And this reward, the word, refers to military bounty. It's what you get as a reward for success in warfare.

So God's referring back to what happened. And he is assuring Abraham, you made the right decision to looking to me and not to a king of Sodom. And so God promises him great rewards.

But still, Abraham raises a concern in verses 2 to 3. Oh, Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.

Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. You could sense Abraham's exasperation in what he says. He says, look, God, you promised me a great nation, but I don't have a single child.

What can you give me that will really be my great reward? But God reassures him in verses 4 to 5. This man shall not be your heir.

[4 : 29] Your very own son shall be your heir. Look toward heaven and number the stars. If you are able to number them, so shall your offspring be. His own son, a son literally from his own body will be his heir.

So this must mean that it will be through Sarai, because that's his only wife at this point. And then verse 6 concludes this way. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abram believed the Lord, and God counted it to him as righteousness. This is a really unusual way of putting that, because usually righteousness in the Old Testament is something that people do. Something that people have because of their righteous actions.

But here it says that what Abraham believed, on account of what he believed, his faith, he was considered righteous. He was counted as righteous. And that's really significant, as we'll see later.

But this faith is foundational to our relationship with God. We must first believe in order to have anything to do with God. In fact, in Hebrews 11, which holds up Abram as an example of faith, it says that without faith, it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him.

[5 : 44] And if you think about it for a moment, that makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? I mean, if you don't believe that God exists, and you don't believe that he rewards those who follow him, I mean, then you're not going to live for him. And you wouldn't want to, and you couldn't, even if you tried.

We have to believe. And that's really at the root of all our struggles, all our sins, really, that the absence of faith. We give into greed, because we don't really believe what God says in Acts 20, 35, when he says, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

We give into discontent, because we don't really believe what God says in his word. 1 Timothy 6, 6, Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.

Right? We give into self-loathing and hatred, because we don't really believe God's word, when it says in Jeremiah 31, 3, God says, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

We give into guilt and self-condemnation, because we don't really believe what God's word says in Romans 8, 1. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[6 : 58] Right? It's at the root of every sin, every struggle we have. We take things into our own hands. We take control of our life situations, instead of waiting on God, entrusting ourselves to him, because we don't believe God's word that says, As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55, 9. Disobedience always stems from deficient faith. And so here, it's that initial faith, not Abram's subsequent righteousness, that is counted to him as righteousness.

Because Abram has that initial faith in God, to believe in his promises and live by it, that's why Abram is counted here as righteous. And this faith is what we are called as God's people to live by.

And so God assures Abram first of this promise of offspring, saying that it's from your own body that my promise will be fulfilled, your own heir. And then God turns to the second part of the promise he made in Genesis 12, which is land.

He wants to give Abram a people, and then a place for the people to dwell. And so he says in verse 7, I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.

[8 : 09] But once again, Abram has a concern. Well, Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? It's great that you're telling me this, but I don't know if you can tell, but there's a whole nation living here.

What do you mean? How can I know that I will possess this? And God says, Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. And Abram brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other.

But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Wow, what a strange response to Abram's request for confirmation, right?

He's saying, How can I know that I will possess this land? This is really a covenant ratifying oath. It's an oath sign that God gives to Abram. And the meaning is given in verses 12 to 16.

Follow along with me as we read it. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there.

[9 : 14] And they will be afflicted for 400 years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

And you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation. For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. So that ritual that God had Abram enact, the sacrifices and the animals cut in half and set over in parallel against each other.

So this is a picture really of what's going to happen to his descendants. So God foretells Israel's captivity in Egypt, what's going to happen, what we're going to see in the book of Exodus, for 400 years.

And 400 is a round number. It's representing the three generations that will be in captivity. And that seems to be why the animals that he picks for the sacrifice are three years old, to represent the three generations of captivity that Israel's people will experience at the hands of the foreigners.

Now, and so that's calculated from one generation, which Genesis 6, 3 tells us 120 years. So it's a round number. Now, combine this with the fact that all the animals are sacrificial animals.

[10 : 25] They're all clean animals, not unclean animals. Today, the animal seems to represent Israel, the chosen people of God who are set apart, who are clean. And so they are the people, and God then appears in this form.

And he appears in the form of a smoking fire pot, like a smoking oven of sorts, which is hard for us to imagine because we don't have the same kind of oven, and a flaming torch.

And it passes between the pieces of the cut-up animals. And this is a theophany. It's an appearance of God. God, when he appears throughout the Old Testament, he often appears in the form of smoke or fire, right?

So when he leaves Israel in the wilderness, he leads them in the cloud, pillar of cloud by day, and then the pillar of fire by night. And when he appears on Mount Sinai, it says in Exodus 19, 18, Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire.

So that picture, that ritual, is telling Abraham, reassuring him, that God is going to walk in their midst. When Israel is in captivity and suffering under foreign persecution, God is going to be with them and walking among them.

[11 : 33] And that's the old sign that God, and it's through that God makes a covenant with Abraham. Just to explain, since this is the first time this has come up, the real covenant that's initiated, inaugurated, the covenant is a legally binding relationship between two parties.

And the Bible portrays God as always making covenants with his people. And a typical ancient Near Eastern covenant was between a suzerain, a more powerful lord, and a subject, a vassal.

And then, so the more powerful king would basically promise to protect this less powerful king, the vassal. And then in return, this less powerful king would be loyal to this king, and pay him tribute and all such kind of things.

And so here, of course, God is that suzerain king making a covenant with Abraham, assuring him about all these promises, but it also comes with some obligations for Abraham. Now, it won't happen right away, though, if you caught that, right?

So it's going to be preceded by 400 years of oppression in a foreign power. And then his descendants will inherit the land. So that's God's unusual providence, as we see in our lives as well.

[12 : 47] And that's helpful for us when we feel like God's not answering our prayers, or when we feel like in our lives that we're suffering in a way that we shouldn't be. Or it's because the reason that God gives for this delay of fulfilling his promise to Israel is really interesting.

Verse 16, chapter 15 says, And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. The Amorites, it stands for all the inhabitants of Canaan.

Basically, they're being used to stand for all the inhabitants of Canaan. And so what's going on then is God's action in bringing Israel and giving them the promised land and helping them to conquer the promised land is not just some arbitrary act of favor, saying, well, I like these guys and I don't like these guys, so I'm going to bring Israel and give it to them.

No, it's also simultaneously a divinely executed judgment on the wicked nations. So God's not just dealing with Israel. He's also executing judgment on the nations that deserve his punishment.

And so that's helpful because it's a great illustration of God's sovereignty at work in Abram's life. And it's because often we won't understand God's providence in our lives. So for example, like Abram, if we're in the middle of a 25-year period of waiting for the child that God promised, it's easy to doubt his promises.

[14:10] Or if we're like Israel in the 400-year captivity in Egypt waiting for the promised land, it's easy to question God's sovereignty, whether he really can fulfill his promise or not.

But it's helpful for us to remember that we don't see the whole picture. Only God sees the whole picture. So it's kind of like a picture mosaic. If you've seen some big picture mosaics, if you look up close and are looking at just the several pictures that are side by side, you can't make sense of it.

It doesn't, you don't see how those two pictures relate. But when you take a step back and you take in the whole picture mosaic, then you see how those are all forming one grand picture. Only God sees that whole picture.

So as people who, with their faces up against it, only seeing a little bit here and there, we can entrust ourselves to God knowing that he is sovereign, he is in control, even when we do not understand his providential leadings.

And so God establishes his covenant. It's his covenant inaugurated. But we soon see the covenant transgressed in chapter 16. Because keeping the faith, of course, is easier said than done.

[15:17] And we see Abram and Sarai struggling to do so in chapter 16. And so it says in verses 1 to 3 of chapter 16, follow along with me. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant.

It may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abram had lived 10 years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife.

That first sentence is really terse, but it conveys that devastating reality, the plight that Sarai was facing. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

Now that's not as big of a deal in our culture where people delay having children or forego having children altogether for all kinds of reasons. But in this culture, for a married woman to not have children was a source of great shame and humiliation.

[16:30] And so this is saying that she had borne him no children. And she is by now 76 years old. And she has every good practical reason, human reasons, to doubt God's promises.

It's, I'm well past childbearing age. What do you, so she's, it's starting to look at other options. And so the option that she comes to, the idea she has, is surrogate motherhood.

She's saying, you know what, I'm surely not going to have a child. So let's have my servant, whom she probably had as a part of her dowry, or maybe she acquired her in Egypt, since Hagar is described as an Egyptian.

And she wants to give her, who is, who belongs to her, to Abram, her husband, so that she could have children by her instead. This was a common practice in the ancient Near East.

But from the biblical perspective, this is not the right thing to do because we know from Genesis 2 that God's intention for marriage is to be between one man and one woman. And God had explicitly told Abram that he will have a son through his own, through his, from his own body, that he will have his own heir.

[17 : 39] And at that point, when God gave that promise, Sarai was his only wife. So he, he should know at that point that Sarai was the woman from whom God's promised offspring would come. But, but at this point, it feels right to them to find another way.

Because, humanly speaking, they can't believe that this is going to happen. And look at Sarai's, what Sarai says to Abram, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

Even though the Lord promised them children, he says, the Lord prevented me from having children. And so, she's failing to believe in God's promises and she's living by what she judges to be the best way.

She thinks that, well, this must be God's way because I can't imagine another way. And that's very tempting for us. Often, when we face our desires, when we face our sinful desires, we're tempted to rationalize them.

We're tempted to say that this must be God's way. This must be what God wants because I can't imagine another way. Think someone, for example, of maybe someone who, a married man, a Christian man, or a woman who finds another man or a woman very attractive in the workplace.

[18 : 51] They start to get very intimate, have great conversations, and they start to rationalize and tell themselves, my wife doesn't listen to me and support me like this woman does. My husband doesn't care for me like this man does.

And then they start to rationalize. This must have been the person God wanted me to find in the first place. This must be the relationship that I'm supposed to be in. When God's word expressly says that it's sinful.

or a man who is attracted to other men or a woman who is attracted to other women.

It feels right. This must be God's will for me because I was born this way. God wouldn't give me these desires if this were sinful.

But God's word expressly says that it's sinful. So whenever we find ourselves starting to rationalize our sinful desires, the things that are expressly forbidden in God's word, then we need to stop right in our tracks and then go back to God's promises and hold on to that because believing in God's promises should always trump anything that we feel or what our circumstances might seem.

[20 : 12] And so that's... And we know that what Abraham and Hagar are doing here is sinful. There are several textual clues to this. Look at verses 2 to 3 of chapter 16. Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

And so Sarai took Hagar, the Egyptian, her servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. The phrase listen to the voice of occurs only one other place in Genesis.

That's Genesis 3.17 where God promises his judgment over Adam after his sin in the Garden of Eden. He says to him, because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree.

So here, it's a type of a fall. The man who should have taken responsibility for his wife and who should have led her instead listens to her and follows a way of sin.

And then look at the sequence of verbs also. Sarai took and gave. Took Hagar and gave her to Abram. That's the same sequence of verbs that's used to describe Eve's sin in Genesis 3.6.

[21 : 17] She took of the forbidden fruit and gave some to her husband. So again, what's happening here is not God's ideal. It's a diversion from God's will. They're transgressing the covenant because they cannot wait on God's promises.

They wanted to take things into their own hands. The consequence, of course, isn't good. Verses 4 to 6 tell us about the unhappy aftermath. And Abram went into Hagar and she conceived.

And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave my servant to your embrace.

And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me. But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your servant is in your power. Do to her as you please.

Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled from her. Now, Sarai is quite audacious after the suggestion she made and she's very adept at blame shifting here.

[22 : 20] And Abram, likewise, sins. He cowards and he is very good at absolving himself of any kind of responsibility. Right? So because what's going on here, it's, even though Hagar was the maidservant of Sarai, you remember, Sarai gave her to Abram, not as, you know, not as a concubine, as a wife.

So Hagar is Abram's wife. It's his responsibility to protect her. And he says, Oh no, she's in your hands. Do to her whatever you want. Right? And Hagar and Sarai treats her, it takes, it runs with it and she treats her harshly so much so that she flees.

And those two words, treating harshly and fleeing are the exact way Israel is described in Egypt. They were treated harshly so they fled. So there's this kind of poetic justice in what's going on here.

And one commentator puts it this way, What the Egyptians would later do to Sarai's children, Sarai did to a child of Egypt. But God listened to both. His compassion is with all his creatures.

So even here, God intervenes on behalf of Hagar and he sends and the angel of the Lord comes. And the angel of the Lord or the angel of God, you know, appears 69 times or so throughout the Old Testament.

[23 : 36] And it's usually, and I think it's almost always, is God appearing in human form. And so at first, it appears to just be a messenger of God, an angel of the Lord.

But then later in this course, it turns out that it's actually God himself who is addressing his people. And so that's what happens here because in verse 13 it says, So Hagar called the name, not of the angel, but name of the Lord who spoke to her, You are a God of seeing.

For she said, Truly here I have seen him who looks after me. And God tells Hagar to return and to submit to Sarai.

And the word submit comes from the same root as the word treated harshly. So God's not just telling her to return, but he's also telling her to return to submit to the harsh oppression of Sarai.

But why? Because he says the promise, he extends the promise he had given to Abram to Hagar and her offspring. You will also be a mother of many nations, of the multitude.

[24 : 38] And because of that, God sends her back so that she can be an heir of that promise. And often, it seems, God's promises, his blessings come through a period of suffering. And that's what we see with both Israel, with the prophecy of their oppression in Egypt, and with Hagar.

And then chapter 16 ends with a contrast to how it began. It began by saying, Sarai had borne Abram no children. And then it ends with saying, Hagar bore Abram children.

It says that three times. And so at this point, there's a little bit of ambiguity in the story. Well, I thought it was supposed to be Sarai that was supposed to be an heir to receive God's promise in the covenant.

But it looks kind of like maybe Hagar is the person that's going to take that place. But then chapter 17 clears it up and teaches us that this was actually a diversion. And that's the final point.

It's covenant confirmed. And another 13 years has passed according to chapter 17. And God says to him, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you and you may multiply greatly.

[25 : 45] The expression God Almighty, it refers to, it's always used in the context of God bringing fruit out of something that is barren. So it refers to his power to bring fruit out of barrenness, infertility.

And so it says God Almighty, that's his name. And he tells Abram to walk before him. That's the same way Noah was described earlier. That's the same way Enoch was described earlier in the book of Genesis.

To walk before God means to take every step of your life toward him and with him. To live, to make all the decisions in your life for him. And so that's what Abram is called to by God himself.

And then he also commands another thing and this is the circumcision. This is a covenant sign for Abram and all those who are with him. And circumcision, as you well know, involves a cutting of the foreskin of the male genital organ.

And it's therefore particularly appropriate actually for this promise because God's promising Abram a progeny, the people, generations of nations that will come from him. And so it's kind of an intimate reminder that's perpetually there.

[26 : 51] You know, remember that promise. Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. It's also kind of a sign, a reminder of the punishment is that if you do not follow God, if you're not committed to him, you'll be cut off from your people.

You'll be cut off from the people that you are called to be a part of. And, but of course, you can cut off the foreskin all you want and people could still be rebellious, right?

People could still rebel against God. People could still refuse to follow God's covenant, keep God's covenant. And that's why other parts of Scripture speak of circumcision, not just of the foreskin, but of the heart.

Deuteronomy 36, Moses prophesied to Israel of the day when the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live.

But we don't see this prophecy fulfilled in the rest of the Old Testament. Instead, we find God's people failing over and over and over again.

[28 : 00] They do not keep God's covenant. They do not believe in his promises and they do not live according to his promises. But if God's people do not keep God's covenant, then God's supposed to cut them off.

That's what it says here in chapter 17. In verse 14, it says it's supposed to cut them off from his people. But God never does that throughout the entire Old Testament. He tenaciously remains with his people even though they continue to violate his covenant and to rebel against him.

He does punish his people to reinforce the covenant, but he never nullifies or dissolves the covenant. He keeps the covenant. And you can see this also in the way God makes the promises to him, to Abram, because he says that I will multiply you greatly and I will make you exceedingly fruitful.

I mean, those are two words that are very familiar to us by this point in our series in the book of Genesis. Be fruitful and multiply. That's what God had told Adam. That's what God had told Noah.

And now Abram is this new Adam figure at the precipice of a new creation and God tells him that I will make you fruitful and multiply.

[29 : 14] So God's guaranteeing what he had earlier commanded to his people, but how can God guarantee that to a faithless people, people who do not follow him and keep his commandments?

For the answer, we have to go back briefly to chapter 15 and back to that ritual where Abram cuts up the animals and lines them up parallel to each other. And because there's a twist to that ritual that is highly unconventional in a typical ancient Near Eastern covenant making oath, you do the same thing and then not the suzerain, not the covenant lord, but the covenant subject is supposed to walk between those two pieces.

And that's a way of bringing upon himself a maledictory oath. saying, if I do not keep the covenant, I will become like these animals. That's what that means. But who walks between the pieces of animals?

Not Abram, who should be walking down through it, but the Lord God himself, walking down between the pieces and invoking that, and saying, promising, in essence, that he will himself bear the curse of the covenant that his people repeatedly fail to keep.

And that's exactly what God did when he sent his son, Jesus Christ, who is the son of God who came into the world to save sinners. He kept God's covenant by believing in his promises and living by them.

[30 : 41] He did that perfectly. Yet, instead of enjoying the blessings of the covenant, he submitted himself to take upon himself the curse of the covenant and died a sinner's death on the cross and rose again so that those who believe in Jesus might be counted righteous as Abram was counted righteous because he died on our behalf.

And that, brothers and sisters, that is how we become circumcised in the heart, not just in the flesh. Galatians 6.15 says, Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

And how do we become a new creation? 2 Corinthians 5.17, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. It's when we believe and live by the promises of God in Jesus Christ, that's when we are circumcised in our hearts.

That's when we are filled with the Spirit and enabled to live according to his promises. And that's what this passage is ultimately calling us to. And that's why it's said, remember, in chapter 15.6, Abram believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And as we close, I want to ask you this question. What are the things that you count on for your righteousness? What are the things that you count on to be in right standing before God?

[32 : 10] Is it your own morality? your righteousness, your faithfulness, how you did this past week?

If what makes you righteous, if your confidence as you approach God's judgment to stand there is your own righteousness, that will turn out to be a false confidence. And the Father's verdict will be guilty.

But if you are counting on Jesus, what he did for you on the cross, and you're relying on his righteousness, then even though with every fiber of your being as you stand before God in judgment, you know you are guilty and deserving of eternal punishment, the verdict will be not guilty, acquitted, forgiven, covered, righteous because of what Jesus Christ has done.

So I urge you, whether you're a Christian or not, to consider that and to keep God's covenant by believing in the promises and living by the promises that he has given to you in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together. God, it's easy to believe in our heads that your promises are true, that you are indeed good and sovereign, that you are gracious toward us and you give every good blessing to us.

[33 : 51] Yet our idolatrous hearts so often question you, doubt your calling, impugn your goodness. so help us, God.

Give us faith to believe in your promises and to live every step, every part of our life in accordance with it. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.