

God's Promise for the Nations

Genesis 17:1-27

Promises, promises

Imagine you are cooking dinner for tonight but someone in your family is usually late coming home. You say, "I'm cooking a special dinner for tonight will you be home on time for dinner?" They say, "Yeah, I'll be there." But this is not good enough. You need to be sure they will be on time so you say, "Promise me you will be home by 7pm."

What are you doing asking for a promise? You want them to bind themselves to doing what they say. You don't trust them saying a vague, "I'll be there." Of course people don't always keep their promises.

Would you thrust Donald Trump and his promises? Would you trust a used-car salesman? What about someone advertising Snake Oil claiming it cures all aches and pains? What about an email that says, "I have \$1m in Nigeria. I'll share it with you if you send me \$500?"

The problem is we have heard too many promises that proved false, too many claims that are unreliable. We become sceptical.

So how do we know we can trust God's promises? Promises for our eternal future? That he hears our prayers? That he is with us in trouble or sickness? That it is really worth serving him?

How could Abraham believe that God would make him a great nation through Sarah? He was 99 years old now. Sarah was 90. The body clock wasn't just ticking it had completely run down rusted up and stopped. It is hard sometimes to believe in God's promises.

When we want to know if we can trust a person we might ask for a firm promise but sometimes we need more. In court we get people to swear an oath to tell the truth. *"I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."*

If you are buying something like a house you have to have a contract: sheets of paper covered with terms and conditions to be signed before witnesses to make sure people do what they say they will.

We want something more than words. Even between two people wanting to share life together it is more than the words, "I love you." They have a wedding:

It is all about a relationship

Promises are made to each other in the form of vows.

There is a ceremony and the signing of certificates.

And there is the sign of the rings.

All this is to make sure this is a binding relationship so the partners will feel secure and know they can trust their spouse.

This is very close to the idea of the covenant that God makes with his people. He wants us to be sure we can trust his promises.

It is said that if you want to know if someone loves you you pick a daisy and pull off the petals one by one saying, "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not...." The last petal tells you

whether he loves you or not. This is really just guessing. You can't be sure. But God doesn't want us to be guessing. He wants us to be sure of his love so he makes a covenant.

Genesis 17 The Covenant with Abraham.

1. Relationship

It is about a relationship.

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. (17:7)

God binds himself to Abraham and to his descendants to be their God, and he calls Abraham to walk with him. *Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.* (17:1)

This isn't just a deal, like buying a house. It is a close relationship. To be their God means he will love, bless, provide and protect them. Three times in the chapter Abraham is told this is an everlasting covenant. (Verses 7, 13, 19) God will remain faithful to this covenant forever.

In a marriage we promise to love "...as long as we both shall live," but God promises his love forever. This is a unique and special relationship. This covenant is for Abraham and his descendants. This is the first time descendants are included in the promise.

Abraham is told, *"You will be the father of many nations."*⁵ *No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.*⁶ *I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."* (17:4-6)

The New Testament shows us that this is not just physical descendants but includes those who share Abraham's faith.¹⁶ *The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* (Romans 4:16) We are included as God's people.

Why is all this so amazing? We need to see the big picture. Remember the earlier chapters of Genesis. God made a good world but the people sinned. Murder soon followed and sin increased. People came under God's curse and judgement. They were cut off from God.

God could have destroyed mankind. But in love he chose to bring people back to himself. Out of the darkness of a world in rebellion against him he chose Abraham to begin this process. In Chapter 12 we saw that God promised to bless Abraham but he also promised to bless all peoples on earth through him. This was the beginning of God's world-wide plan.

Jesus was born as a descendant of Abraham, born a Jew. And it is through faith in him that we inherit God's blessing. We become part of God's covenant people. We enter this relationship.

2. Promises

In the marriage service the couple make promises to each other like this:

"I N. in the presence of God, take you M. to be my wife,
To have and to hold, from this day forward,
For better for worse, for richer for poorer,

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In sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,
As long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow and promise."

God makes solemn promises in the covenant:

- God promises to be God to Abraham and his descendants. He promises this amazing relationship.
- God promises Abraham that he will be the father of many nations and that kings will come from him. (17:5, 6) This is so significant that he gets a name change. Abram is changed to Abraham meaning father of many. This is ultimately fulfilled in the many who follow Jesus.
- God repeats the promise to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan. (17:8)
- God promises that he will give Abraham a son through Sarah. This is the bit that is hard for Abraham to believe. Previously he was told it would be a son "from your own body." (15:4) So he had a son through Sarah's maid Hagar. (16) But now he is told specifically it will be through Sarah. She will be the mother of nations and kings. (17:16) Her name is changed.

The covenant promises will be fulfilled in Isaac. Abraham finds this very hard to believe. He says, *'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'*¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, *'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'* (17:17-18)

There may be times when we find it hard to believe God's promises. We may find it hard to believe that God loves us when we face ongoing sickness or difficulties. We may feel that our prayers just bounce off the ceiling. Perhaps when we are conscious of our sin we wonder if God would really forgive us. When called to bear some heavy cost to serve Jesus we may wonder if it is really worth it. It may be as we face death itself we start to doubt that Christ's death is enough to save us.

Last week Marty showed us that God understands our needs. He showed how God graciously provides for our doubts and fears. He gives us the many promises in his word but he goes beyond words to give us his covenant.

3. Last week we saw the covenant ceremony (15).

That was like the signing of Marriage Certificates in a wedding.

In the New Testament we see God's much greater confirmation of his covenant in the death of Jesus. If God would do that for us we can be sure he will keep his other promises. He signs the New Covenant in Jesus blood.

3. Sign

There is one more element to the covenant. In marriage the couple exchange rings as a sign of the marriage. My ring reminds me of Joy's love and promises. It also reminds me of the commitment I have made to her.

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Here God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision.

You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner. (17:11-12)

It was a sign to remind them of God's great promises. It was also a sign to remind them to *"walk before God faithfully and be blameless"* (17:1), to keep their side of the relationship.

The babies of God's people were to be circumcised at 8 days old. They were included in the covenant from this early age. In the same way Anglicans baptise the children of believers to show that they belong to God, they are part of God's family. We bring them up to believe that God is their Heavenly Father. They have to make their own decision when old enough but until that time we treat them as God's children.

All Abraham's descendant had to be circumcised. *Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'* (17:14) In the New Testament when Gentiles were converted some people thought they also had to be circumcised. This caused quite an issue in the early church. You can see why they were concerned because it says, *Any uncircumcised male ... will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'* (17:14)

But the New Testament shows they soon realised that all you needed was to have faith in Jesus. We are made right with God by faith not by some ritual. (Galatians 5:6)

Under the New Covenant we have the new signs of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. They were given to assure us of God's promises. God knows that sometimes we need more than just words. We can look back to our baptism and take part in the Lord's Supper. These are things we can experience, touch and feel. They can help us focus on the promises of God's word. They can strengthen our faith that God is a covenant keeping God. He has bound himself to us by covenant.

We are not guessing. We are not plucking the petals of a daisy. He will do what he has promised. He will forgive and save those who trust in Jesus. He will be with us always no matter what happen in life. Nothing can separate us from his love.