

Genesis 15:7-21

Covenant Ceremonies

We know that God always keeps His promises. We can all testify that God has never been unfaithful, nor has He ever fulfilled His promises incompletely or inadequately. God is perfectly faithful. It is also true, that God has always fulfilled His promises at precisely the perfect time. His perfect time. He has never been a moment early or a moment late in keeping His commitments.

This has often posed challenges for even the most devout of believers. We want God to act on our timetable. We not only pray that God will do a certain thing, but do it when we want Him to. This is not only unbiblical, but plainly foolish. God is omniscient. He knows all. That means He knows the future as well as the past. And He certainly knows the future better than we do. He also knows what truly is best for us. While we are often guided by our passions, God is not. God always does what is best for us at the best possible time.

This passage records the continuation of the conversation between God and Abram. In the earlier part of the dialogue, God had promised Abram both seed and land. Abram had then wondered how this might be, since he was childless, and suggested that Eliezer of Damascus would be his heir, a mere servant, a member of his household. God insisted that this was not His plan. Abram would have a son. In fact, in dramatic fashion, God took Abram outside and showed him the countless stars on a clear, desert night. “So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5) God said, and Abram believed.

The Question

Now, God continued the conversation. As He had done earlier, God identified Himself. “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it” (v. 7). Previously, God had identified Himself as the one Who would keep His promise. That is, God focused on what He would do in the future when He told Abram “your reward shall be very great” (Genesis 15:1). Now, however, God recalled to the mind of Abram what He had already done for him. He had called Abram from his homeland. As Abram heard this, I wonder if his mind flashed back over the recent years of wandering, famine, fear, sin, repentance, partings, battle, and worship.

God’s purpose was to recall to the mind of Abram His faithfulness. God was reminding Abram that it was He Who had called him out of Ur. It was God Who had “took him outside” (Genesis 15:5) to show him the heavens, as the representation of the numberless progeny God promised. God was calling to the mind of Abram His acts of faithfulness, as He asked for yet more faith from Abram. In doing so, God was establishing a method of dealing with His people that He would use frequently in the future.

For example, God told Moses, when giving him the Decalogue, that “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). And later, when giving the Law, God reminded His reluctant, and frequently disobedient, people, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God” (Leviticus 25:38). We can appreciate the fact that God is in the habit of bringing His people to the place where He wants them to be, and then, by reminding them He had done so, to ask for faithfulness in going forward.

But though Abram believed, He still had questions. Not doubts, but questions. So he responded, “O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?” (v. 8). As before, Abram was not expressing doubt that God could fulfill His promises. He was not calling upon God to offer some proof of His ability to keep His word. After all, it is clear that Scripture does not record God’s rebuking Abram for his question. Rather, Abram was honestly wondering how all this would take place. Abram wanted details. He wanted specifics.

One can think of Moses, who when charged with what he believed to be an impossible task responded to God.

“¹Then Moses said, ‘what if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, “the Lord has not appeared to you.”’ ²The Lord said to him, ‘what is that in your hand?’ And he said, ‘a staff.’ ³Then He said, ‘throw it on the ground.’ So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. ⁴But the Lord said to Moses, ‘stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail’ - so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand - ⁵‘that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you’” (Exodus 4:1-5).

The Ceremony

God sought to demonstrate His commitment to Abram through a particular ritual. He commanded Abram to “bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon” (v. 9). That they were to be three years old may indicate the time at which the animals were of most value, but we cannot say that with certainty. In any case, Abram immediately obeyed. Abram “brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds” (v. 10).

Four of these animals were later used in the sacrificial system. The heifer, which was the most valuable of the animals, was used only on special occasions such as the selection of a king.

“¹Now the Lord said to Samuel, ‘how long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons.’ ²But Samuel said, ‘how can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me.’ And the Lord said, ‘take a heifer with you and say, “I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.”’ ³You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you’” (1 Samuel 16:1-3).

It was also offered in sacrifice as an atonement for murder (Deuteronomy 21:1-9). A three year old would have been old enough to produce milk but yet young enough to be of great value, with many years of life remaining.

The goat was a very common, perhaps the most common, animal among the Israelites. It was one of the two animals acceptable for use at Passover.

“³Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘on the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household.

⁴Now if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbor nearest to his house are to take one according to the number of persons in them; according to what each man should eat, you are to divide the lamb. ⁵Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight” (Exodus 12:3-6).

It was also required as a sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:5).

The ram, a male sheep, was an important sacrifice in the ordination of priests (Exodus 29:1). It was also used in guilt offerings (Leviticus 5:15). The turtledove was widely used in both offerings (Leviticus 1:14) and purification rituals (Leviticus 12:6). The young pigeon is the outlier, as it was not an animal used in the sacrificial system later established by God for the Israelites.

The ceremony may seem strange to modern readers, but in the ancient world such ceremonies are attested in both the Bible and in other historical sources. For example, a 17th century BC text records a treaty between Yarimlin and Abban. Abban had just relinquished the city of Alalakh to Yarimlin and to validate the transaction, “Abban placed himself under an oath to Yarimlin and had cut the neck of a sheep and said ‘let me so die if I take back that which I gave you’” (translated by D. Wiseman, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 1958). The idea seems to be that of invoking a curse equivalent to the killing of the animals if a contract was not kept. Another ancient text, this of Hittite origin, has a defeated army cut into two parts a man, a goat, a puppy, and a small pig. The troops then walked between them and sprinkled water over the corpses.

In the biblical text, the closest parallel is found in Jeremiah 34.

“¹⁷Therefore thus says the Lord, ‘you have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother and each man to his neighbor. Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,’ declares the Lord, ‘to the sword, to the pestilence and to the famine; and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ¹⁸I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts - ¹⁹the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf - ²⁰I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth” (Jeremiah 34:17-20).

The context of this passage is this. King Zedekiah of Judah had made a covenant with the people of Jerusalem in which all of the Hebrew slaves were set free. The release of the slaves had apparently been ratified by a ceremony similar to that of Genesis 15. The covenant was established by the leaders of the community passing between the parts of a severed calf. Later, however, those people reclaimed their slaves and returned them to captivity. Jeremiah was rebuking them for doing this and announcing the judgment of God upon those who had not kept the covenant. Since the people had gone back on their promise, God was *releasing* them into the hands of their enemies.

The parallel is not perfect, however. There is no sense in which God is placing Himself under a possible curse of He did not keep His promises. It is impossible theologically to understand how God could punish Himself for not being faithful.

Perhaps a closer example is the oath taken by Moses and the Israelites as they affirmed their covenant with God.

“³Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘all the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!’ ⁴Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. ⁶Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ ⁸So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’”
(Exodus 24:3-8).

Here again we see a covenant ratified by a ceremony involving sacrificial animals. In this case, rather than having the people walk between the divided carcasses, Moses divided the blood of the sacrificed beasts into two parts, some of which was set aside and the remaining amount was sprinkled on the people.

A final detail mentioned in the text is that “the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away” (v. 11). Though no doubt the smell of fresh blood brought in the scavengers, birds of prey are a common metaphor in the Old Testament for foreign nations. The fact that such birds were unclean only gave increased emphasis to the illustration. The implication here seems to be that Abram is protecting his descendants, represented by the covenant animals, from the predatory attacks of other nations. Having recently rescued Lot from the invading kings, Abram understood his role as father of his people.

Important Details

But God did more than simply give instructions for a ceremony. God graciously gave Abram further details regarding His promise to provide him with seed and land.

“¹²Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³God said to Abram, ‘know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete’” (v. 12-16).

The fact that the sun was going down has preoccupied many who search for discontinuities in the Bible. That is because, in the previous part of the conversation, God had taken outside to look at the stars as an

example of the generosity with which He would fulfill His promise of descendants. There is no need for concern, however, since birds of prey hunt mainly during the day, we can easily surmise that the conversation had moved into a second day. Perhaps having prepared the animals, which no doubt took some time, Abram went back inside his tent and awaited whatever might happen next. The remainder of the day passed and now it was nightfall of day two.

Abram fell into a “deep sleep.” This is the same phrasing used for the time when God caused Adam to fall into a sleep that He might create Eve (Genesis 2:21). It was not uncommon for the recipient of a vision to be asleep. In fact it seems the logical method by which God might appear in a dream. It is also worth noting that this is the one moment recorded in Scripture where Abram experiences fear in the presence of God. Though God had introduced Himself with the words “do not fear” (Genesis 15:1), Abram, now, was terrified. The Hebrew word used is indicative of an extreme human emotion. It was often used of those who experience God’s presence. Yet this terror comes upon Abram while he is asleep. But this is no nightmare. This is no act of the subconscious. God appeared again to Abram to offer clarification as to how He would keep His promises.

God began with a statement that must have unnerved Abram, asleep or not. “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (v. 13). God specifically answered Abram’s query as to how he would know. In doing so, He gave Abram a brief synopsis of future events regarding Abram’s descendants and the promised land. God told Abram that his descendants would be separated from their homes and enslaved and oppressed for four centuries. They would be aliens. They would be victimized. They would be persecuted. It was not an auspicious answer to the question Abram had posed.

But here again, we find a text to which some have pointed as an error in the biblical record. As the Israelites prepared to leave Egypt, following the celebration of Passover, Scripture records, “⁴⁰now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. ⁴¹And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:40-41). But there is no reason to presume God in trying to be exact in His representation to Abram of the future. His purpose is not to prophesy specific detail, but to give Abram a general idea of how God will keep His promises as to the future descendants and land promised to Abram.

The specific nation in which the Israelites will be enslaved was not mentioned in the vision. Abram may have guessed that it was Egypt because of his own sojourning there, but God was not so specific. What Abram was told was that his descendants would be strangers. They would be aliens. They would be as Abram had been, a wanderer in a land that was not their own.

God did declare, though, that for Abram’s descendants “afterward they will come out with many possessions” (v. 14). Abram no doubt remembered his own wealth, largely gained while he was in Egypt. He also must have remembered that he had gained it at great cost. But that was in the past. Those were sins for which Abram had been forgiven. Here, God was giving a continuation of the original promise God made to Abram. When God first called Abram to leave his homeland, God had said “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (Genesis 12:3). And so it would be in

Egypt. The Egyptians would enslave God's people, but they would suffer for their actions. The events of the ten plagues and the ensuing exodus would be a repetition of the plague on Pharaoh's house during Abram's visit there, and the gifts given by that Pharaoh would be replicated by the plundering of the Egyptians by the Israelites as they fled the land. These later events, however, would be magnified greatly in their scope.

Then God shifted His attention from the nation as a whole back to Abram. Abram was given personal assurance. With a personal touch, God said, "as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age" (v. 15). To die peacefully meant to die contented and fulfilled. Old age would be of little consolation, if Abram's remaining years were turbulent and anxious. God graciously reassured Abram that his faithfulness would be rewarded in this life as well as in the next.

And not only Abram, but his descendants would be remembered as well, for "in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (v. 16). The Hebrew word for generation, *dôr*, is used to represent a span of time, rather than a specific number of years. If the "fourth generation" coincides with the "four hundred years" then a single generation is one hundred years. Perhaps this reference to a generation was used because Isaac would be born to Abram when Abram was one hundred years old (Genesis 21:5). Another thought is that a common biblical reference is "to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18). But again, God's purpose is not to give chronological detail. That is to say, these may not be a literal references but simply a way of speaking with which Abram was familiar.

The Amorites who are mentioned were pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan, and God would use the invading armies under Joshua to punish them for their sin. This makes the occupation of the land by the Israelites less an act of aggression and more an act of justice. The returning Israelites are the tool God would use to carry forth His judgment. The depravity for which the Amorites were to be judged would become familiar to the Israelites, and relations with them would be specifically forbidden in the Law.

²⁴Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. ²⁵For the land has become defiled, therefore I have brought its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:24-25).

²²You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them, so that the land to which I am bringing you to live will not spew you out. ²³Moreover, you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them" (Leviticus 20:22-23).

The Covenant Ratified

Having finished His explanations to Abram, God then made His covenant with him.

¹⁷It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying,

"To your descendants I have given this land,

From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:
¹⁹the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite ²⁰and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the
Rephaim ²¹and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite” (v. 17-21).

The smoke and flame symbolized the presence of God and foreshadowed the events at Mount Sinai. “All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance” (Exodus 20:18). Fire was often a symbol of the presence of God. But notice that only God passed between the pieces of the sacrificed animals. This is significant in that it means that the covenant was unilateral. If the covenant were bilateral, then Abram would have passed through as well. Nothing is imposed on Abram. He is free of any obligations. God only places requirements upon Himself.

The boundaries of the land promised are specifically described. The “river of Egypt” is not, as one might think, the Nile, but rather the Wadi El-Arish. Historically, this marked the dividing line between Palestine and Egypt. When the conquered land of Canaan was being divided, the tribe of Judah received the southernmost portion. Its boundaries extended “to Azmon and proceeded to the brook of Egypt [Wadi El-Arish], and the border ended at the sea. This shall be your south border” (Joshua 15:4). The Euphrates River is self-explanatory. Interestingly, it was during the reign of King David that these limits were reached.

As for the ten people groups mentioned in the text, it is difficult to be precise. Seven nations are mentioned later, as the Israelites are about to enter the land, “when the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you” (Deuteronomy 7:1). Names common to both lists are the Hittites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, and Jebusites. In fact, there are twenty-seven passages in which the names of the people groups inhabiting the land of Canaan are listed, and their number ranges from two (Genesis 13:7; Joshua 5:1) to twelve (1 Chronicles 1:13-18). So clearly this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. The emphasis is rather on the fact that God will give to Abram’s descendants the land He has promised and will remove from there all of its current occupants.

Takeaways

Abram was blessed in that God graciously chose to give him details regarding how He would keep His promises. We should remember that we are not necessarily entitled to the same. But, interestingly, even with these further details, as we will see next time, Abram was tempted to try to fulfill God’s promises in his own way. We must be wary of doing that. If God has promised, let us trust that He will keep His promises in His perfect time. Let us guard ourselves against trying to adjust God’s timetable to our own perceived needs. We are simply to trust that God will keep His promises in His perfect time.