

Lesson #6: God's Covenant with Abraham

Genesis 15-17

Principle doctrines: 1. The Abrahamic Covenant was *unconditional* and carried a *promise...*

2. **Unconditional Covenants are entered into by Faith Alone**
3. **Children of believers are *outwardly* included in the Covenant**
4. **The sign of the Covenant "is" the Covenant**
5. **The Covenant was always open to Gentiles**
6. **The Covenant sign does *not* guarantee salvation.**

Major & Minor Characters: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael

1) What is a Covenant?

-A Covenant is a solemn, oath-bound relationship. It is the strongest form of human relationship, is very difficult to break, and always carries promises for faithfulness and consequences if it is broken. All human Covenants are *Conditional*; that is, each party entering into the Covenant vows faithfulness to the other party under the stated conditions of the Covenant. If one party becomes a Covenant breaker, then the innocent party is released from the terms of the Covenant (1 Cor. 7:15), and the Covenant breaker bears the consequences (Matt. 19:9). Examples of human Covenants include marriage, Covenantal friendships (cf. 1 Sam. 18:3), and peace agreements (Genesis 26:26-31; 31:44-54). Note that in a true Covenant, God Himself is a witness (Gen. 31:53; Matthew 19:6), making the Covenant breaker guilty of the 3rd Commandment (Exodus 20:7).

-When God enters into Covenants with mankind, we distinguish between *Conditional Covenants* and *Unconditional Covenants*. An example of a Divine Conditional Covenant would be the Covenant of works, made with Adam, which Adam broke (Hosea 6:7). In that Covenant, the *condition* of perfect obedience brought with it the *promise* of eternal life. *Unconditional Covenants* are all part of the Covenant of Grace, where, in essence, God Himself fulfills the terms of both parties (God and Man), and Himself bears the consequences for the Covenant breaking of the elect.

2) The Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional! (Genesis 15:1-6; 17:

-We note that God comes to Abraham. This simple fact should not be overlooked or taken for granted, for it is one of the *major differences* between Christianity and pagan religions. Our God comes to US and initiates the Covenant; we do not "call Him up," summon Him, or approach Him via incantation or ritual.

-The *promise of the Covenant* was that God would be God to Abraham and his offspring, which would be in number like the stars of the sky and would ultimately come from many nations (15:4-6; 17:4-7; cf. Gal. 3:28-29). As an attestation to this reality, God changed Abram's name (exalted father) to *Abraham* (father of nations).

-**The smoking fire pot and flaming torch** are symbols of the Lord's presence, and of the unconditional nature of this Covenant. When two men made a covenant (literally in Hebrew, "cut a Covenant" is the phrase, referring to the cutting of the animals), the conditions of the Covenant would be stated, and then the two men would solemnize the Covenant by walking between the divided carcasses. The meaning was, "If I break the

terms of the Covenant, may I become like one of these animals." **Only God passes between the animals, thus, the Covenant is unconditional on Abraham's part!**

3) Faith Alone is necessary for entrance into an Unconditional Covenant

-In Genesis 15:6, we see that Abraham "believed Yahweh, and He **counted it to him as righteousness.**" This means that Abraham is counted as "righteous" ... that is, *as though he were a Covenant keeper*, by faith alone. He simply believes that God will fulfill the promises contained within the Covenant, and God does the rest!

-This verse is quoted four times in the New Testament, always as the *example par excellence* of **Justification by Faith Alone** (Romans 4:1-12; 22; Gal. 3:6-8; James 2:23). We are thus saved in the same way that Abraham was saved **and by the same Covenant:** by believing the **promises** of God, particularly by looking to Jesus Christ alone for salvation (Romans 4:20-25; Gal. 3:6-8; John 12:44; etc.). *In the purple verses above, we see this doctrine explicitly laid out.*

-In the New Testament, we learn that faith is *itself* a gift from God (Eph. 2:8; Acts 11:18). Thus, it cannot be said loudly or clearly enough: Salvation is of the Lord!

-Likewise, Christ fulfilled the conditions of the Covenant on behalf of His people. When He died in our place (Isaiah 53), He was treated as a Covenant breaker, and we are treated as Covenant keepers, by grace alone (John 19:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

4) Children of believers ARE included in the Covenant

-It should be noted that God did not just make a Covenant with Abraham, *but also to his offspring* (cf. Gen. 17: 7), and that **this Covenant** with its clearly stated terms ("with you and your offspring after you") is an **everlasting Covenant.**

-However, this does **not** mean that God's promise extends **spiritually** to every literal offspring; to every literal child. Even in the original context, we see God making a distinction between Ishmael, who is **not** a child of the Covenant, and Isaac, who **is** a child of the Covenant (Genesis 17: 18-21). *Thus, we distinguish between those who are merely within the visible community of faith, who are outwardly partakers of the Covenant, and the elect, who are spiritually and truly partakers of the Covenant.*

-In Romans 9:7-8, we see that only the "**children of promise**, the elect, are counted as offspring, heirs of the Covenant; yet, this same **promise** is extended **1.** to us and **2.** to our children, **and 3.** to as many as are far off, as many as the Lord shall call to Himself (Acts 2:38-39).

-This was the same reality that existed in the Old Testament: cf. Genesis 17:18-21).

-Reading Galatians 4:21-28, it is *impossible to deny that the same promise that Isaac partook of is today possessed by us.* "**Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise**" (Gal. 4:28). That is, Gentile **believers** (cf. the addressees in Galatians 1:1-5) are seen by God to BE the offspring of Abraham, spiritually. They really and truly possess the same Covenant, and the same promises that were made to Isaac.

Galatians 4:23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Galatians 4:28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

-Thus, we see clearly that the same Covenant made with Abraham and his children is the same Covenant we partake of today. The same members, both naturally and spiritually, are partakers of this Covenant. That is, believers and their children are considered to be

visible members of the Covenant and partakers of the promise that God will be God to them and to their children (Genesis 17:7; cf. Matthew 19:13-15; Acts 2:39). They are to receive the sign of the Covenant by virtue of their birth and inclusion in the Covenant Community, *because we are in the same everlasting Covenant*. However, the true spiritual promises belong only to the elect, the true Israel within Israel (Romans 9:6-8; 1 John 2:19). This is the doctrine of the **Visible Church and the Invisible Church**: The Visible Church is made up of all *professing believers and their children*; the Invisible Church is made up of the *regenerate elect only*. The unregenerate among the Visible Church will be removed, as chaff separated from wheat, or goats separated from sheep, at the last day (Matt. 25:31-32).

-**Jesus Himself** distinguishes between what it means to be outwardly and literally descended from Abraham, and thus, to be an outward partaker of the Covenant, and what it means to be spiritually and truly a child of Abraham. Those who are only outwardly partakers are actually "children of the devil" (John 8:44) and foreign to the true Kingdom of God (cf. Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:3-7), even though they have the Covenant sign. **Nicodemus, in other words, was IN the visible Covenant community, but OUTSIDE the invisible, true Israel (Romans 9:6-7).**

5) This Covenant was *always* open to Gentiles (Exodus 12:48-49), although it belonged properly to Israel (Romans 9:4)

-When someone wanted to be saved and worship the true God, they had to take the sign of Circumcision. At that point, *they were considered a few*, and their children were considered part of the Covenant community. The same is true today: we have an existing Covenant Community, called "The Church/the Assembly" (the same term that is applied to Israel dozens of times in the Old Testament, which is why Jesus used the term in the first place). When a child is born to this community, we follow Deuteronomy 6:4-9, teaching them to pray, worship, and believe. They receive the initial sign of the Covenant, which is baptism. They are part of the **visible** community of faith; the **visible** Church (WCF 25:1-2), as they are **visibly** seen in the church, **visibly** worshipping and **visibly** praying. When an unbeliever wants to come into the Church by faith, *they do the same thing the people in Exodus 12:48-49 did*: they repent, profess faith, take the initial sign of the Covenant, which today is baptism, and then "they and their household" (Acts 16:15; etc.) are part of the community of faith.

6) The New Covenant is contrasted with the Mosaic Covenant alone; NOT with the Abrahamic Covenant.

-One of the fundamental errors of dispensationalism is to presume that the contrasts made with the Mosaic Covenant apply to *all Old Testament Covenants*. Instead, a careful reading of the texts themselves show that the distinction is between "the Covenant that I made with them on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt" (Hebrews 8:9, Jeremiah 31:31-34; cf. Gal. 4:24). We know that the strict, additional, temporary laws of this Covenant were "added because of transgressions" and were always meant to be temporary, until Christ should come (Gal. 3:19, 24). Therefore, we would *expect* a contrast between it and the New Covenant!¹

¹ The Mosaic Covenant does have a gracious element too (cf. Ex. 20:1-2), and is properly part of the Covenant of Grace. It is a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing, that God would make Abraham a

-However, the New Covenant is only New as it compares with the Old (the Mosaic- cf. Hebrews 8:13, from whence the phrase "Old Covenant" arises). The "Old Covenant" then, is not "the entire pre-Christ interactions between God and man, but is *limited by the Scriptures to refer to the temporary Mosaic additions given at Sinai, which Covenant was broken.*

-Instead, we see immense continuity between the Abrahamic and the New Covenant, such that the New Covenant IS the fulfillment of the Abrahamic. In other words, the "newness" of the New Covenant is the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant by Christ, together with the realized promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Thus, we read: **1)** The Abrahamic Covenant is the Gospel (Galatians 3:8); **2)** The Abrahamic Covenant contains the same mechanism of justification by faith alone (Romans 4:3; 4:23-24; cf. the whole chapter); **3)** The New Covenant confers the same blessing "blessed *along with* faithful Abraham" (Gal. 3:9); "In Christ Jesus *the blessing of Abraham* comes to the Gentiles" (Gal. 3:14); **4)** The New Covenant contains and confers the same promises (Gal. 3:29; Acts 2:38-39; Gal. 4:13); **5)** The New Covenant makes us children of Abraham, like Isaac (Gal. 4:28; Romans 9:8; Romans 4:16). *Search in vain, and you will never find a contrast between the Abrahamic and the New Covenant, because they are one and the same: the newness being that the Abrahamic promises are fulfilled in Christ.*

7) The Sign of the Covenant IS the Covenant (Gen 17:10; Luke 22:20; Col. 2:11-12)

-If you actually read these texts, you will see what we mean when we say "Sacramental language." God says "This IS that" when it comes to the sign and the thing signified. What I mean is, no one would say that the sum total of the Covenant is circumcision, baptism, or the Supper ... however, GOD says, "THIS IS MY COVENANT: circumcision" and "THIS IS MY COVENANT: the cup."

-Likewise, when we are "buried with Christ in baptism" no one would say either 1) that simply going through the outward act automatically unites you to Christ, OR, 2) That God ONLY requires the outward act in order to be in Covenant with Him.

-Instead, we distinguish that **the Sacrament "is a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had while he was yet uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11-12).** That is, the Sacrament, when applied *to elect believers*, **seals** (God's language, not mine) the benefits that were already the possession of the believer before he/she received the sign. We can think of this like a seal on a letter that already has the contents written out. *Thus, very importantly*, baptism and the Lord's Supper are more about what GOD says about you than they are about an outward testimony. To be sure, when someone takes the sacrament, they *are* testifying to their personal faith (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26). However, the primary meaning of a Sacrament *to the believer* is the representing, sealing, and applying of the Christ and His benefits.

-Note: This "seal of righteousness" was applied to children of believers!

-Yet, we MUST distinguish again that *none* of the inward, saving benefits are applied to unbelievers, even though they take the sign. We see this explicitly with circumcised Ishmael, who was not in the Covenant although he had the sign, as well as with numerous New Testament characters who were baptized by Christ (such as Judas) or the apostles (such as Simon Magus). **You must be born again.** or else the signs of the Covenant bring nothing but increased judgment (1 Cor. 11:30).

great nation. The commandments are preceded by God's gracious deliverance. The people even during this time were saved only by grace through faith; not by sacrifices (cf. Romans 4:6-8); etc.