

• A covenant is a promise with an oath

• Three kinds of covenant

• Noah's covenant of generosity – eight ingredients

• Achieving our calling and entering into rest

God's covenant with Abram

1. Began with a reminder

• The purpose of salvation is inheritance

2. Has a promise

3. Encourages and motivates

• Abram is unsure

Abram had expressed his anxiety ^{☞1}, and so God began making a covenant with Abram to help him. We have come across 'covenant' before in Genesis. A **'covenant' is a promise which has an oath added to it.**

There are three kinds of covenant: covenants of obligation to a senior, covenants of generosity towards a junior, and two-way covenants between equals. In Genesis we have seen the 'covenant of generosity' for the world through Noah ^{☞1} and now we have another 'covenant of generosity' which God makes for Abraham's seed through Abraham (see Genesis 15:18; 17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21, where the word 'covenant' is used).

Noah's covenant was a covenant of generosity. We saw once before some of its ingredients.

(i) It has a promise.

(ii) It has an oath; it is a promise with an oath added to it.

(iii) A covenant of generosity has a beneficiary, someone who is receiving the blessing of the oath. (A different kind of covenant, a covenant of law, has a 'victim', a target, a person who is obliged to swear allegiance.)

(iv) A covenant of generosity is unconditional, after it has been given, although

(v) it might be given as a reward.

(vi) A covenant may take time to take place because it is not settled until the oath is given.

(vii) A covenant may have attached to it a sign or symbol of some kind.

(viii) A covenant involved the shedding of blood in some kind of sacrifice.

Now we take a closer look at these matters, in connection with this covenant with Abram.

In a nutshell the teaching is this. **A covenant is a bond or relationship with God.** Christians are in 'covenant' with God. Christians have to get to a level of obedient faith so that God takes an oath to them personally. The covenant to Abram has already been made, so their salvation is secure. 'Abraham's seed' will not be lost. Yet our own 'oath of God's mercy' must be personally sought from God. When God swears in His mercy then our calling will be achieved, the Christian 'enters into rest' with regard to that particular matter. However I am jumping ahead! Let us come back to Abram and see how this matter works out in his life.

In the case of Abram:

1. The covenant began with a reminder. Genesis 15:7 tells Abram what God has done for him ('I brought you out...') and what the purpose of his salvation is ('... to give you this land to possess it'). The word 'possess' is linked with the Hebrew word for 'inheritance'. It means 'possess as an inheritance'.

The purpose of salvation is inheritance. God brought us out in order to bring us in. We were brought out of idolatry in order to be brought into our inheritance. Inheritance is not salvation, but it is what initial salvation is leading towards.

2. The covenant has a promise in it. Verse 7b reminds Abram of the promises. 'This is what I want to do for you', says God. 'I am wanting to fulfil these promises in your life. I am wanting you to achieve an inheritance in this land of Canaan'.

3. Covenant is designed to encourage and to motivate. Abram has doubts ^{☞1}. Although he has been given the promises several times ^{☞2}, Abram still has doubts. It seems such an immense thing to believe. There is not much indication that anything that he has been promised is actually happening. Abram often wonders whether he has misunderstood.

So here he asks 'O sovereign Yahweh, how may I **know** that I shall possess it?'. He is unsure. 'How may I know?' he asks. In reply God starts a covenant-

^{☞1} Genesis 15:2,3

^{☞1} 6:18; 9:19, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17

^{☞1} 15:8
^{☞2} 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17

making procedure. **Covenant-on-offer is God's encouragement and God's motivation to believers who might be overwhelmed by doubts.**

• *The covenant is 'on offer' at this stage*

I think it is important to realise that the covenant is only 'on offer' at this point. As the story of Abraham develops it will become clear that the oath is not actually given until Genesis 22:16 when God says '*By myself I have sworn*'. At the moment God is offering an oath, but the actual swearing of the oath does not come until later.

4. The covenant begins with blood -sacrifice

4. The covenant begins with blood-sacrifice. Five animals are brought and are killed ¹. They are the same five 'clean' animals that are used in the later sacrificial system in the law of Moses. Covenant always has the shedding of blood as its starting-point. This was the custom of the ancient world, but it also has importance in the gospel of Jesus. It looked forward to Jesus. The death of Jesus on the cross for our sins is the starting point of any relationship with God. One cannot even begin to be in relationship with God unless sin is atoned for in some way. So in the ancient world, the shedding of blood came in at an early stage in the procedure of any covenant.

¹ Genesis 15:9-10

• *A look forward to the blood of Jesus*

5. The one receiving the promises has to protect the blood -sacrifice

5. The one receiving the promises has to protect the blood- sacrifice. Two rows of partly sacrificed animals are laying there in the open countryside. In the evening Abram will be given a revelation and will learn more of what God is promising to do for him, but for the moment the pieces of the sacrifice are laying there exposed. Not surprisingly vultures are swooping down from the sky seeking to snatch up the pieces of the sacrificed animals. It is a familiar sight to anyone who has travelled in tropical countries. Abram stays there driving away the birds of prey that are swooping down from the sky seeking to seize pieces of meat. Eventually God will speak to him but while he is waiting he must protect the blood sacrifice.

• *The basis of every blessing we receive is the blood of Jesus Christ*

The basis of everything that will come to Abram is the shedding of blood and he must not let anything damage or spoil the sacrifice that God has provided. Something like this is involved in the Christian life. The basis of every blessing we receive is the blood of Jesus Christ. Vultures will swoop down from the sky to detract from the cross of Jesus. Some preachers will stress some particular favourite doctrine and soon you have a semi-cult with no atonement in its preaching. Paul said '*God forbid that I should glory in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*'.

• *The vulture of scepticism and religiosity*

There is the vulture of scepticism and religiosity. Many religious people do not seem to realise that the basis of Christian faith is the cross of Jesus. Sometimes they are offended about talk of Jesus' atonement. But the sacrifice of Jesus is crucial; the vultures must be driven away. Without the blood of Jesus there will be no inheritance, no experiencing of the promised blessings of God.

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