

Open Heart, Open Bible

Genesis and Luke's Gospel

Linking Theme: Covenant

Bible Passage for weekly readings (week 5):

Genesis ch.'s 12 – 17.

Covenant (2) – with Abraham

The Bible introduces us to the covenant-making God in Genesis ch.9, and I wrote about His covenant with Noah as we read that chapter. That covenant expressed the Lord's goodwill to all the creatures coming off the Ark, notwithstanding the fact that He knew that the heart of man was still unchanged (8 v.21). God often gives, or asks for, a sign to emphasise the reality of the covenant, and in Gen.ch.9 the sign was the rainbow.

The word "covenant" is described as a "contract" in most dictionaries, an agreement between two parties to their mutual advantage. A covenant from a divine point of view differs from this. It is made by one party (God) to bless the other (man). Man has two choices, to accept the terms or to reject them. He cannot change them; they are non-negotiable. The extent to which mankind enjoys the benefits of the covenant is dependent on the extent to which he lives in relationship to His Creator, in submission, in trust, and in obedience. If he breaks faith, covenant benefits are jeopardised.

In this week's chapters from Genesis, we see the unfolding of God's covenant with Abram, an agreement which has a great bearing upon our own salvation as New Covenant believers. It begins with the promises contained in v.'s 2&3, which Abram believes, as is obvious by his obedience in leaving the land of Haran (v.4). Arriving in Canaan, the Lord promises that land to him, and he demonstrates his faith in the building of the altar at Shechem. He worships.

The covenant is again confirmed in ch.15, when God promises Abram descendants who will be as numberless as the stars in the night sky. V.6 says:

"Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness."

Belief = faith = righteousness - that's how it works!

The agreement is confirmed by the blood sacrifice offered by Abram on the Lord's instructions, and he has to drive away the birds of prey as he goes through the necessary procedure. (N.B. This is new – there were no "birds of prey" before the flood, the birds ate plants, as did the other creatures. Now, they kill to live, and

will also feed off carrion). The man of God repels them. The prophecy that God then reveals to the spirit of Abram as he sleeps is remarkable in its detail. We see it being outworked in the rest of the Pentateuch (the first 5 Books of the O.T.), and fulfilled in the sixth Book of Joshua as Israel finally possesses Canaan.

Man of God that Abram is, Scripture does not hide from us his failure to consistently obey the Lord and to be “led of the Spirit” (Romans 8 v.14). We see him going to Egypt, and lying to protect himself and Sarai (ch.12). We see him taking her advice to father a child through Hagar (ch.16), and Sarai turning on him when Hagar conceives and the thing begins to go sour. Yet God works in all of these imperfections and, in particular, blesses Hagar in her distress. She recognises His living reality, and in doing so gives to the Lord one of the important names by which He is known – El Roi, the God who sees. The first person to name Him in this specific way was an Egyptian maidservant, descended from Ham!

In ch.17, the onus placed on Abram to keep his side of the divine covenant becomes more apparent. Just as the rainbow had been the sign of the covenant with Noah, so circumcision is the sign of the covenant with Abram. The two covenants are, however, very different. Mankind did not have to respond to the rainbow – it stands as a sign of God’s blessing to all, as long as earth endures. We are all here today in a beautiful earth because of the covenant with Noah. The covenant of circumcision required a response, and brought those party to it into an accountable relationship with the living God. It indicated that the person circumcised belonged to God, a sign of commitment and a sign of loyalty. Thus, throughout the scriptures, unfaithfulness to the covenant, which meant unfaithfulness to God, is seen as spiritual adultery.

The N.T. equivalent of circumcision is baptism (Colossians 2 vs.11,12). In baptism, we are expressing a circumcision of heart to the Lord Jesus. It is now the grace of God which enables us to “walk before him and be blameless” (Gen.17v.1), as opposed to the legal ritual. Our accountability to the Lord is just the same as it was for Abraham and the nation of Israel after him. In responding to God’s call on his life, it is apparent that he was a man of faith, of action and of great courage (see ch.14, as he rescues Lot). The blessing given to him by Melchizedek, the mysterious king-priest figure, is evidence of the Lord’s stamp of approval.

Comparatively few people in the scriptures have their names changed by God Himself. When that happens, the outward change always signifies an inner change of great spiritual significance. Abram (now Abraham) has come through much in the way of God’s tutelage and testing, so much so that his destiny is now stated in the past tense – “I have made you a father of many nations” (v.5). His new name confirms this, but Abraham is now told “you must keep my covenant” (v.9). For

the first time, the covenant is described as “an everlasting covenant”. This covenant breaks through the barriers of sin and death, and gives eternal security to those made alive by the Holy Spirit of God, just as it gave eternal security to Abraham. He has just been made the spiritual father of us all. Those who respond to God in our day, through the Lord Jesus Christ, will outwork His call on their lives in exactly the same way that Abraham did:

Belief = faith = righteousness (Gen. 15 v.6).

(For a good explanation of this, see Galatians 3 vs.6 – 9.)

Sarai’s name is also changed at this time, to Sarah, and she becomes the mother of our faith as she is promised a son, to be called Isaac. (Again, see Galatians 4, v.’s 21 – 31 for Paul’s explanation.) Ishmael is a part of the covenant of circumcision, and is blessed by God in a particular way, just as was Hagar earlier. But the everlasting covenant of promise will go down the line of Isaac, and it will find its fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who enter into covenant relationship with God have done so by believing His word (the new birth - 1 Peter 1 v.23), through the power of the blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1 v.’s 18&19) and the sealing of the indwelling Spirit (Ephesians 1 v.13). The New Covenant blessings on believers are the fulfilment of the blessings promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 vs.2&3. (They are actually more expansive, since Jesus has given us a much greater revelation of our divine inheritance – see Ephesians 1 for Paul’s teaching on this).

Food for thought / discussion / prayer

1) Each time the Lord speaks to Abram and reiterates the covenant, He (the Lord) gives greater understanding and revelation to His servant as to its scope and outworking. We see this as we read Genesis 12, then 15, then 17. Here, we see the three aspects of the covenant relationship between God and man:

a) The word of God must be heard and responded to.

Genesis 12 tells of the word spoken to Abram, which he hears and responds to (leaving his own land, and worshipping between Bethel and Ai).

b) Blood sacrifice must be offered for relationship to be made – sin separates us, and Abram has sinned just as we do.

Genesis 15 recounts the blood sacrifice offered by Abram in obedience to the Lord’s instructions (v.9). The sacrifice of blood confirms the covenant relationship. The blazing torch is the fire of God’s presence accepting the sacrifice (v.17).

c) The legal requirements of a just God have to be fully met.

Genesis 17 speaks of the legal requirement of circumcision, the sign in the flesh of covenant loyalty. No man can be a part of God’s people without assenting to this requirement.

i.e. - in table form, see over:

<u><i>Old Covenant</i></u>	<u><i>New Covenant</i></u> (<i>"better"</i> – Hebrews 8 v.6 N.I.V. <i>"superior"</i>)
<i>Genesis 12</i> – the spoken word - heard and acted upon	<i>John 1 vs. 1 – 14</i> - the revealed Word - received and believed v.12
<i>Genesis 15</i> - the blood shed - by Abram to God - (a temporary offering)	<i>Romans 3 vs. 21 – 26</i> - by God to us - (a finished work)
<i>Genesis 17</i> - the legal requirement - compulsory circumcision - observing the law	<i>Romans 8 vs. 1 – 4</i> - the legal fulfilment - life in the Spirit

Abraham's age has increased from 75 to 99. These have been years of preparation for him, up to that point at which his name was changed, and the mature man of God emerged. How long does it take for a person to become mature in God, and begin to live in the full stature of their calling? Are you there yet? If, like me, your answer is no, are you willing to get there? (Lot never got there. More on that on another occasion!)

2) The Lord reveals Himself to Hagar in a particular way, and blesses her. He may choose certain people in a sovereign way (i.e. – the line of Shem through Abraham), but that choice is never exclusive. Anyone who calls on Him will find Him. This is because of the blessing given to Noah and his sons, which is fully inclusive. The heart of God is that none shall perish. Let's pray that this be our heart also, to motivate our witness in the days ahead.

Readings for next week: Genesis ch.s 18 – 24.