

At the Heart of the Gospel, a Covenant Genesis 15:1-21 (selected verses)

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Intro.

We've been studying I Corinthians 12 for the past several weeks, and perhaps you will recall that I deliberately skipped the lists of spiritual gifts that Paul gives in that chapter. These gifts need to be understood in their larger context, I said, and for that reason we would not be examining particular gifts until later.

Here's the problem we face. In chapter 12 Paul throws up two lists of gifts. The lists overlap, but significant differences are also apparent. The question is, did Paul do this deliberately? Or was he just tossing out random gifts as they occurred to his mind? Then we get to chapter 13 where Paul spends the first seven verses talking about Christlike, sacrificial love before returning, in verse 8 to the subject of spiritual gifts. Finally, when we get to chapter 14 we find Paul focussed on the gift of tongues, and when you read back through the previous two chapters you begin to realize that throughout this three-chapter discourse on gifts, Paul's purpose had been to put the gift of tongues in proper perspective.

It was probably thirty years ago that I first became aware that a close study of chapter 14 reveals the gift of tongues has a covenantal purpose (see 14:20-22). But it has only been in the last few months that I've been asking, if the gift of tongues has a clear covenantal purpose, is it possible that other spiritual gifts also have covenantal purposes of which we should be aware? The answer, I think, is "yes." Based on what the Bible teaches about tongues, it can be argued that some of the other gifts almost certainly have covenantal purposes, and that means that we cannot fully understand the various lists of gifts, including the lists found in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, unless we understand what that means.

But this raises another problem, and some of you are thinking about it already. I can hear you thinking, you know. You're asking yourselves, "What does the pastor mean when he talks about covenantal purposes?" FWIW, I'm glad you asked the question because I intend to spend the next several Sundays trying to answer it. In other words, before we go further into I Corinthians, before we look at the covenantal purpose of tongues in chapter 14, it will help us to step back and take a look at the covenants found in Scripture. We need to understand their importance in the Bible; but more importantly, we need to understand the central role covenants play in understanding the Biblical structure of history, as well as the answer to such central questions as "What on earth is God doing in the world right now?"

But that's all the introduction we have time for today, so let's dig in and take a look at the covenant found in Genesis 15. In many ways it is the typical covenant that provides us with all the necessary ingredients for understanding a divine covenant, and thus it can give us a good understanding of all the covenants of God.

The story in Genesis 15

God has already spoken to Abram in Genesis 12 and called him to a life of faith. He was to leave his home in Haran, and as he went he was to trust that God would guide him. In response to his obedience, God promised Abram that he would become a great man, a great nation, and a great blessing to the world. But by the time we get to chapter 15 many years have passed, and Abram is starting to wonder if God really intends to keep His promises.

To encourage Abram, God entered into a covenant with him in which He, God, bound Himself legally and morally to do for Abram all that He had promised. The covenant consisted of Abram slaughtering several animals, a young cow, a young female goat, a young ram, a turtledove and a pigeon. He cut the larger animals in half and laid the pieces far enough apart that a man could walk between them.

Time passed. Vultures and other birds of prey came to feast on the dead animals, but Abram drove them away. Finally it began to grow dark and Abram was put into a deep sleep, exactly the same deep sleep that Adam experienced when Eve was formed out of his side.

In that sleep he heard the voice of God speaking: “Know this for certain (this tells us something about the purpose of a covenant; God is binding Himself to specific promises that men can know): Your offspring will be foreigners in a land that does not belong to them; they will be enslaved and oppressed 400 years. However, I will judge the nation they serve, and afterward they will go out with many possessions. But you will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a ripe old age. In the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:13-16).

Then Abram saw something amazing. A smoking fire pot and a burning torch (or a torch-like flame) passed between the dead animals. This was God Himself binding Himself to His promises, declaring that He should be killed and cut to pieces if He should fail to keep His promises.

What this tells us about God’s covenants

1. God initiates the covenants He makes with His people.
 - a. God approached Abram—call, promises, covenant, partial completion
 - b. Moses (Israel, Sinai)—call, promises, covenant, partial completion
 - c. David—call, promises, covenant, partial completion
 - d. Christ—call, promises, covenant, full completion

Isaiah 42:6 “I, Yahweh, have called You (God’s Servant Son) for a righteous purpose, and I will hold You by Your hand. I will keep You and appoint You to be a covenant for the people and a light to the nations, 7 in order to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those sitting in darkness from the prison house.

And if you are looking for God’s covenantal promises to His Son, how about Psalm 2:8?

Here is God the Father, speaking to the Son: “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your

inheritance and the ends of the earth Your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron; You will shatter them like pottery” (Psalm 2:8).

And so we can say that Christ fits the pattern God established with the previous covenants, but with one significant exception. Instead of partial completion of the promises, the covenant in Christ reaches full completion, and it completes all the rest!

2. A study of the Biblical covenants quickly becomes a revelation of God’s sovereignty and grace.
 - a. The covenants God makes with men are not mutual agreements between God and man. This is the creator, sovereign God interrupting men’s lives in order to draw them into His plans and purposes.
 - b. This is God’s grace, although not always recognized as grace at the time. But think about it. Who was Abram before his call, a nomad with a few sheep. Moses? A disgraced fugitive herding a few sheep in the wilderness. David? A teenage shepherd fighting bears and wolves. Notice a pattern?
 - c. Who am I and who are you before the Spirit calls us? And what do we become? Peter says it best.

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (I Peter 2:9-10).

3. God’s promises are secured by His covenants.
 - a. At the beginning of Genesis 15 Abram doubted that God would keep His promises. So God entered into a covenant.
 - b. When we are tempted to doubt that God will keep His promises to us, we are sent back to the cross. There we see the sacrifice that institutes the New Covenant and seals all God’s promises to us.

Romans 8:31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He did not even spare His own Son but offered Him up for us all; how will He not also with Him grant us everything?

4. God’s covenants are literally matters of life and death. (Genesis 15:9-10)
 - a. The maker of the covenant essentially binds himself under a blood oath.
 - b. Sin can only be atoned for through blood sacrifice. And why does that matter? Because all have sinned. Because the soul that sins shall die. Because the wages of sin is death. If you don’t believe these things, then tell God that His Son’s sacrifice was a useless or wasted effort.

Heb. 10:10 By this will of God, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. 11 Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. 12 But this man, after offering one

sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.

5. There can be no covenant without a sacrifice.
 - a. It has to be a sacrifice of blood, signifying the giving of life.

I Cor. 11:25 In the same way, after supper [Jesus] also took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant established by my blood.”

6. God’s covenants incorporate the fate of the entire world.
 - a. Gen. 15:13 Over the next 400 years God’s promises to Abram incorporate the fate of Egypt and Canaan.
 - b. The New Covenant impacts the whole world.

II Cor. 5:19 That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us.

7. We enter into God’s covenant through faith. (Gen. 15:6) One of the more important verses in the Old Testament, quoted repeatedly in the Bible. (Psalms, Romans, Galatians, James)
 - a. Because God has established the New Covenant and undertaken all the work of salvation, all that is left to us is to believe—so long as you understand there is no meaningful distance between believe and obey! Fascinating, James gets the last word on Gen. 15:6!
 - b. In the New Covenant, even the faith that saves us is declared a gift of the Covenant-making God. In Eph. 2, for instance, after telling us that God raised us from spiritual death and graced us with faith to believe, he then goes on to say . . .

Eph. 2:12 At that time you were without the Messiah, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the *covenants of the promise*, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah.

Conclusion: At the heart of the gospel is a covenant sealed in the blood of Christ! Do you believe it? Are you in Him?