

The Covenant in the Time of Abraham

Genesis 12–17; Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3–5

Studies in Covenant Theology #6

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WE pick up in the story of the Triune God’s relationship with sinful humanity when he entered into a covenant in the time of Abraham. Abraham obviously stands as a monumental figure in human history as the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam trace their roots to him. The fundamental importance of Abraham is seen in the Lord calling himself “the God of *Abraham*, Isaac, and Jacob” (e.g., Ex. 2:24) and how Paul says he is “the father of all those who believe” (Rom. 4:11). And we even teach our kids his importance when we sing, “Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons had father Abraham, I am one of them and so are you...”

The Westminster Confession of Faith describes for us the unity and diversity of the one covenant of grace throughout biblical history:

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law [the Old Testament], and in the time of the Gospel [the New Testament]: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all

foresignifying Christ to come. (7.5)¹

As we come to the time of Abraham, we see some of these diverse ways of **promises, prophecies...circumcision...and other types and ordinances...all foreshadowing Christ to come** that show us how the Lord continued to pour out his grace to helpless sinners.

A Sovereign Grace (Gen. 12)

In his administration of the covenant of grace in the time of Abraham God reveals *a sovereign grace*. Going back to chapters 10 and 11 we read of the family line of Noah's son, Shem. There are twenty-six other descendants mentioned, not including all their sons and daughters and their sons and daughters. But it's one of those descendants, Terah, upon whom the story focuses at the end of chapter 11. And he had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. After Nahor dies Terah takes his remaining household from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan but they stopped in Haran. Here's the question I want you to think about from all of this: why does the Lord choose out Abram? Why didn't the Lord start all the way back with Shem? Why not start with any of the other twenty-six descendants who are named or with one of them not named? And why not choose to make his covenant with

¹ Rhodes says each administration is like downloading new software onto a smart phone. 63-65.

either Nahor or Haran? Because Abram was the one God chose to reveal his electing and efficacious grace in! Period, end of story! Adapting Paul's language in Romans 9, the reason is not that any of them "had done...either good or bad" but "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls" (Rom. 9:11). God has "mercy on whom [he will] have mercy, and...will have compassion on whom [he will] have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Rom. 9:15-16).

Children, imagine with me that your dad says you can have a new puppy. He takes you and you see ten puppies, all barking, licking, and trying to get your attention. But you can only choose one. So you choose one; you love it, you raise it, and you play with it every day. Why did you choose that one? Probably because it was the cutest, right? With God, though, chooses people because he chooses them to love them. He doesn't choose us because we were better or cuter than anyone else! Abraham is a picture of God's sovereign grace: "In this is love, not we loved God, but that He loved us" (1 John 4:10).

A Gracious Grace (Gen. 15)

We also see in his administration of the covenant of grace in the time of Abraham God revealing a *gracious grace*. That's redundant, isn't it? Yes, but it helps us appreciate what grace is. We so often relate to each other in works-based ways. We make our children earn our love. As husbands and wives, we give love because of what we're trying to get out of the other. But God is the fullness of true grace.

What we don't see here in Genesis is that God choose Abram from a family of idolaters according to Joshua 24. And then right after God promises to make him the father of many nations here Genesis 12 we read that he fears for his life and makes Sarai lie to Pharaoh in order to save his own skin! And yet God still moves forward to formalize the covenant with him in chapter 15. I've mentioned before, but the strange ritual of cutting animals in half, laying them out, and then walking through them was an ancient way of entering into a treaty. It was a graphic way of each treaty partner to say, "If I break the treaty, may I be cut in half!" But here who passes through? Abraham sees "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass[...] between the pieces" (Gen. 15:17). Only God passed through! That's how gracious he is! And then what do we read in chapter 16? Abram disregards the promise of God to give him

an heir through whom the world would be blessed and instead takes matters into his own hands and has a child with Hagar. But the Lord reiterates his covenant in chapter 17 with the sign of circumcision.² But Abraham laughs in 17:17–18 at God’s promise to provide a son through Sarah. And again in chapter 20 he lies in order to save his life.

Is God gracious or what? Don’t ever forget that grace is gracious! He patiently bears with Abraham’s doubt and disbelief. We all struggle with doubts, but some of us do more so. He is long-suffering with our stubbornness. He perseveres in his promise despite us!

A Signified Grace (Gen. 17)

We finally see in his administration of the covenant of grace in the time of Abraham God revealing *a signified grace*. The outward sign of the covenant was circumcision. Notice that circumcision was administered to more than the elect. Was the covenant made with the family of Isaac or Ishmael? Was it made with Jacob or Esau? “But that’s the Old Testament. We’re under the New Covenant, which is made up of only the elect.” Is that so? Doesn’t Jesus say the kingdom has sheep *and* goats, wheat *and* tares?

² After promising to keep the covenant in chapter 15 the Lord then uses the language of “if” you keep the covenant in chapter 17. We have to keep in mind that there are meritorious and necessary conditions. The first is about “doing” and the second is about “describing.” Faith and obedience are necessary to enter eternal life but they are not meritorious because they are gifts of God. On this see Rhodes, 60–63.

Didn't Judas profess faith and perform miracles? Doesn't Paul say the covenant is like an olive tree and some natural branches were broken off that wild branches could be grafted in? And even grafted branches can be cut off too? (Rom. 11) The outward sign of circumcision was also administered to unrelated members of the household according to Genesis 17:9-27. But, again, some say, "That's the Old Testament." Doesn't 1 Corinthians 7:14 say that unbelieving spouses and children of mixed marriages are sanctified by one believing spouse/parent? And that's why we read of him saying he baptized entire households in 1:16.

So there was the outward sign of circumcision but what was the *inward thing* it pointed to? Look at the beautiful promise in verses 7-8: **And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.** That's the essence of the relationship God enters into with humanity by way of covenant. I will be your God and you will be my people. What grace! What a God! Let's pray...