

Part 1 of a series on Old Testament Covenant Theology

Covenant and Promise

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The covenant idea in the Old Testament can be very simply expressed in the words 'God makes and keeps promises'. It is the nature of God that moves him to make his promises, and in keeping the promises which he makes, God does not take anyone into partnership. He is not only totally able to keep his promises without assistance, but he insists upon doing so. As these promises emerge they are focussed upon the central theme of salvation. The God of the covenant is revealed as God the Saviour. The point of the promises is that he pledges himself to a total work of salvation.

1 The Covenant Promises in Relation to Noah

Following the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3, the theme of chapters 4 and 5 is entirely given to the thought of the prevalence of sin over man and over his world. We see in chapter 4 that sin spreads to the descendants of Adam and that it increases in corruption. We see in chapter 5 that sin reigns, for however these great men who lived before the flood managed to prolong their days to such enormous ages, the one epitaph is written over them all — that they died, so that sin reigns. In chapter 6, in the mysterious reference with which the chapter begins, we see that sin reaches a cosmic scale of corruption. 'It came to pass . . . that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all that they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not strive with man, (6.1-3). God saw in this circumstance something to which he was bound to say no. The divine verdict was this: 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man.' (6.5-7)

Notice how the word 'man' rings out over and over again in that narrative. Verse 5 is the divine assessment: God saw the wickedness of *man*; verse 6 is the divine reaction: He repented that he had made *man*; verse 7 is the divine resolve: 'I will destroy *man*'. God is reviewing man in totality. Noah belongs with that lot. Noah was with the rest of the world under the wrath of God. Noah is corrupt man under threat of destruction, but he is promised salvation. The covenant God is the Saviour God. When he finds man under threat of destruction, there is that about him that prompts him to effect salvation.

Let me elaborate this truth in three ways. (i) *The judgement of God*. There is no need to say much more under this heading. God is the sole sovereign in his own

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world; he does not have to ask permission to pass judgment. When he sees a universal situation requiring a universal judgement he says, 'I will destroy'.

(ii) *The Mercy of God*. But into that judgment of God comes the mercy of God. 'The LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the ground... But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.' (6.7-8). Here we see the mercy or grace of God. If you look up this expression 'X found grace', you will discover it in situations like David and Mephibosheth, or in Genesis 19 in the case of Lot being rescued from Sodom. Every time this expression occurs, it focusses attention as far as the receiving end is concerned on a meritless situation. If a person testifies 'I have found grace', he is saying 'There is nothing about me that could have earned or prompted this'. When, therefore, we read in Genesis 6.8 'Noah found grace', the scriptural understanding of that phrase is that 'grace found Noah'. There came into his meritless situation that which, left to himself, he could never have achieved.

Notice how carefully Genesis safeguards this truth. After verse 8 there comes one of Genesis' own chapter headings, 'these are the generations of Noah'. This phrase occurs about twelve times in Genesis and always has the effect of drawing a line across the narrative. It says, 'so far so good; now look at it this way'. Consequently, when Noah appears before us in verse 9 as Noah the righteous man, there is a line between that statement and the statement at the end of verse 8 where Noah is as we have seen, the man upon whom grace comes from God. We are not permitted by Genesis to reverse the order of verses 8 and 9. We cannot say, 'Now we see why Noah was chosen'; for not only would this be untrue to the way in which Genesis uses its chapter headings, 'These are the generations of', but it would also set Genesis out of the context of the rest of Scripture. For Scripture forbids the thought that there is that in any man

or woman which explains the electing mercies of God. What we must say when we come to verse 9 is not 'Now we see *why* Noah was chosen', but 'Now we see *that* Noah was chosen'. Genesis 6.9 sets before us the mark of the truly elect, the marks of the man or woman upon whom mercy has come from God.

It was to that man that the word 'covenant' was spoken for the first time by God. 'I do bring the flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven... But I will establish my covenant with thee' (Genesis 6.17-18). The covenant is shorthand for 'my promise of salvation'. The expression used here is 'I will establish my covenant' and the inner meaning of the word is 'I will set my covenant in operation'. If on the one hand the wrath of God is flooding in over a corrupt world, God sets another agency in action, 'I will set my covenant in action, the outreaching of my grace which will lay hold upon you and will keep you while the world is perishing'.

(iii) *The righteousness of God* We have noted already in this situation judgment and mercy, and I want you to

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note thirdly the righteousness of God. God does not say to Noah 'My covenant is a divine helicopter which is going to come and lower an escape net for you, to lift you to heaven until I have finished with the earth'. Noah was left to endure the flood just like the rest of mankind. What the covenant did for Noah was that it wrapped Noah round with the certain protection (the ark), which guaranteed that when the waters of judgment fell upon him, they would fall upon him unto salvation. He was left in the place of judgment, but he was so secured by the covenant that the very form of the judgement guaranteed his salvation. Noah had to endure judgment because this covenant-making and covenant-keeping God is the God of the utmost righteousness who remains just. He deals with Noah on the basis of that which sin merits, and yet he sets himself forth as the Saviour of sinners.

The covenant with Noah is accompanied by a sign, 'And God said . . . I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, and I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.' (Genesis 9.12-15) The bow is a sign of the covenant which God makes. It is appointed by God — 'I set my bow in the

clouds', and it is even appointed in the first instance *for* God. How wonderful it is that this Noah narrative focusses all attention upon God. But then God lets man into the secret. He tells man what the bow means. As soon as God lets man into the secret, the sign of the covenant begins to speak to the covenant man concerning the promise of God. This, covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people. It is a token and guarantee of the word of God.

2 The Covenant Promises in relation to Abraham

In the narrative of Noah God was the sole agent. The Abraham narrative underscores this same theme.

The story of Abraham focusses upon his childlessness. He starts out as the man who is unable to contribute, saying at the beginning of chapter 15 'I go childless'. The story proceeds by telling us that he is disallowed from making any contribution. In accordance with the law of the land of the time, and prompted by Sarah, Abraham takes a second wife and has a child, Ishmael, whom Sarah recognises as her child. But God simply disallows this device. He will not permit Abraham to contribute to the fulfilling of the divine promises. When Abraham does seem to make a contribution, when he and Sarah have a child by the ordinary processes which God has ordained, the narrative is very careful to tell us that he does so *totally* by the enabling of God. God fulfils his promises in his own time, in his own way, and by his own power. The covenant points to a salvation which is all of God; man is in no position to contribute or to co-operate.

Now the Abraham narrative focusses attention on at least the following three central points: (i) *God's work in election* In Genesis 15.6 we read of Abram that 'He believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness. 'Abraham comes to this tremendous moment of trusting the divine promises. Here is the essence of justification by faith. But notice what God says to him in verse 7; 'I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.' 'Now Abraham', says God, 'please don't think that by believing you have climbed into a position by your own merits or deservings. Let me take your story back to where it began. I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees.' The first

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movement was God's movement. The story does not elaborate the truth beyond that point, but it does insist on the priority and primacy of the work of God.

(ii) *God's work in self-obligation* The narrative in chapter 15 continues in verse 9, 'Take me an heifer of three years old . . .' You know that Abraham was called upon to set up a very elaborate sacrificial situation. He was to take a

variety of animals, great and small, and having slain them to divide their carcasses so as to leave a pathway between the slaughtered bodies. Notice two things: Firstly, the sacrifice was organised at the divine behest, 'Take for me'. God is the mover in providing this sacrifice. Sacrifice is not a technique whereby man twists the arm of God; sacrifice is God's own provision. Secondly, notice that in this ceremony, which now centres upon these slaughtered animals, God is the sole agent. 'A deep sleep fell upon Abraham.' (15.12) He is immobilised in order that God might be the only one active in this situation. When Abraham was so immobilised and when the sun had gone down a furnace that smoked and flashed passed between these pieces (15.17). To pass between the severed pieces was the taking of a very vivid and terrible oath: 'So may it be done to me if this oath is broken.' God alone passes between these severed pieces. Not only does Abraham not pass, but he is disallowed from passing. God takes upon himself the total obligation of the covenant. So verse 18 goes on: 'In that day the LORD made a covenant.' The narrative does not stop to spell out details, but look back through the Bible and ask yourself what that commitment of himself by God meant. It meant that God was saying, 'If this covenant is broken I will take the obligation for it.' So there in Genesis 15, in implication, is the day of Calvary, when he became a curse for us.

(iii) *God's work in regeneration* The third stress in the story of Abraham is the stress on regeneration, God's work in making Abram into Abraham, in making the man

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into the new man. In Genesis 17. 1-5 we read that, 'The LORD appeared to Abram and said unto him, I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee.' So God comes in regenerating power to make the man into the new man, to make Abram what he was not before — Abraham — to given him capacities which he did not possess before, to make the childless man a father on a colossal scale. So when the child will be born, they will say that 'this is what God has done.' This promise God now proceeds to wrap up in a covenant sign, the sign of circumcision.

In Genesis 17, the narrative falls into two parts, and the word 'covenant' occurs in each part. The covenant is first of all defined in a series of promises: personal (verse 5), domestic (verse 6), spiritual (verse 7), and territorial (verse 8). But then, in verses 9-10 you find this: 'God said unto Abraham, As for thee, thou shalt keep my covenant, thou, and thy seed after thee throughout thy generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every male among you shall be circumcised.' So, on the one hand,

the covenant is a series of promises, on the other, it is circumcision. Every time Abraham therefore observed the mark of circumcision in his own body, he would declare, 'I am the man to whom God has made promises.' Covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people.

3 The Covenant Man

Thus far we have looked at the covenant promises as they emerge in the stories of Noah and Abraham. Now I want us to look at these covenant men themselves. As these men are displayed in the stories about them, there are again three focal points: election, mediation and law.

(i) *The objects of divine election* The covenant men were what they were because God chose them to be so. Noah was the man immersed in the world's corruption until grace found Noah. Abraham was the man to whom God said, 'I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees.' What happened to Noah and Abraham happened by divine decision.

(ii) *Mediatorial men* In each case the covenant man stands in a mediatorial position to others. If you will take this clue and go back especially to the stories of Noah, you will discover this sort of sequence over and over again, 'My covenant which I make between you and all flesh.' And when Noah is to gather his family and the animals into the ark, it is specified more than once, they are in the ark *with you*. They are not there in their own right, but only in a derived right. They come under benefits because *you* have come into covenant.

The same truth emerges with Abraham. To Abraham God declares, 'In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 12.3). Abraham comes before us as the man through whom the world will be blessed. Covenant men are mediatorial men.

(iii) *Under the law of God* Noah had no sooner stepped out of the ark than God declared his law to him. Genesis 9.1 describes how 'God blessed Noah and his sons, and he said to them, Be fruitful and multiply'. God then goes on to lay down law concerning man's food and concerning the sacredness of human life. He brings Noah under the law of God.

With Abraham, and especially at the moment of circumcision, we see clearly that covenant man is obedient man. In the case of Noah the covenant sign is one that God put there. But when it comes to Abraham God says, 'Now Abraham, the sign of the covenant, the sign that I am giving promises to you, is circumcision. You do it.' At the very moment when the promises light upon a man he is pressed into obedience. As soon as Abraham marks his body with the knife of circumcision he glories in the promises and he responds in obedience. Circumcision does not symbolize obedience, it does not symbolize response. It symbolizes promises, it summons obedience. But at the one moment those two things come together. And Abraham cannot look at the mark of circumcision and glory in the promises without at the same time being reminded over and over again in his commitment to God — 'Walk before me and be thou perfect.' Therefore, the law of God is written into the heart of the covenant idea.