



THE GIFT OF COVENANT: THE ANCHOR OF OUR JOY

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1407

Genesis 15:7-21

Seventh Message

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December 17th, 2000

On this third Sunday of Advent we will reflect on the theme of joy. Our world works incessantly for happiness but knows very little joy. The reason for that is that we cannot work for or achieve true joy. Joy is an inner excitement that God is at work, doing very large things that involve us as believers. One of the greatest expressions of joy in the Bible is Mary's song of praise upon meeting Elizabeth, who also was miraculously pregnant. Mary voices her sense of being absolutely overwhelmed with gratitude:

***"My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard for the humble state of his bond-
slave;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count
me blessed."*** (Luke 1:46b-48, NASB)

Mary goes on to say just how large this event was: it was nothing less than the completion of all of Israel's dreams:

***"He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his offspring forever."*** (Luke 1:54-55)

What pure, unadulterated joy! The things that God promised to Abraham generations ago were now being fulfilled, and Mary was at the very center of them. As she sang these words, however, little did she know of what lay ahead for her or her child. Every ringing word she sang would ultimately come true with more joy than her initial song, but the process would be longer, more arduous, and indescribably more painful than she ever imagined.

This is what we will be examining today as we look back to God's initial covenant with Abram. We are continuing our journey with Abram as he wrestles between growing in trust and articulating his doubts. I find that this is the hallmark of our journey of faith — growing in trust while yet giving voice to our doubts. It is something that should characterize us continually. Last week, we saw Abram's response to the promise that his seed would be as prolific as the stars of the night sky. He considered God trustworthy, and gave him his full trust. Today, we will look at God's expanding of Abram's vision of the second half of the promise, which is the land.

I. O Holy Land (15:7-8)

And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." (Gen 15:7, NASB)

In response to Abram's faith, God not only counts him righteous, he reconfirms the second aspect of his promise — the gift of land. Abram has left his homeland in search of a new home, but up until now he has wandered as an alien in the land of promise. However, God says that one

day the land will be fully his to own and possess, thereby making his alien status merely a temporary state.

This is the fourth time that God has spoken of the promise of land to Abram (12:1, 7; 13:15,17). Each time the promise becomes more specific and firm. The language here further strengthens God's commitment to him. The introductory phrase, "*I am the Lord who brought you out of...*", is the kind of covenant language that was common in the ancient world when kings made treaties with vassal states.¹ The preamble of a treaty-covenant began by listing the gracious acts of the king, followed by the requirements of loyalty that were demanded of his new subjects. As is so often the case, God adopts these ancient Near Eastern customs to communicate, investing them with new meaning that transcends old ways of thinking. This language, "*I am the Lord who brought you out,*" will be reiterated ten times from Exodus through Deuteronomy as the basis for God's covenant with his people.² By adopting this terminology, God is declaring that his relationship with his people is initiated by grace, and that our loyalty comes in response to that grace.

Yet, despite God's confirming legal language, Abram confesses that he is still in need of more assurance.

And he said, "O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?" (15:8)

Abram's question to God is similar to the one he asked earlier, in 15:2. "*What (mah) will you give me...?*" now becomes, "*In what (bemah) way can I know?*" Again, we find God's generosity and renewal of commitment give Abram the freedom to articulate his doubts with increasing clarity. God addresses those doubts now by asking Abram to perform an interesting task.

So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. (15:9-10)

When a covenant was made between two parties in the ancient world, the seriousness of the commitment was enacted symbolically by cutting animals in two. The two parties would then step between the cloven animal parts and recite an oath, using words like, "*May it happen to me, as these animals, if I do not fulfill my obligations to this covenant.*" Alter explains, "The idea is that if either party violates the covenant, his fate will be like that of the cloven animals. The Hebrew idiom *karat berit*, literally, 'to cut a covenant' ...may derive from this legal ritual."³ The clearest text on this is found in the prophet Jeremiah, when God states:

"I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before me, when they cut the calf in

two and passed between its parts...and I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.” (Jer 34:18-20)

As Abram is asked to meticulously prepare for this legal ceremony he must have felt the weight of God’s commitment. It would be like taking a case to the U.S. Supreme Court. But together with the solemnity of the occasion there is also a profound sense of intimacy in the midst of the legalities. This can be seen in the intimate language that the narrator uses when Abram places the sacrifices side by side. It reads, literally, “*he placed each (man) half facing his associate.*”⁴ This vivid anthropomorphic language changes the atmosphere from a courtroom to a wedding, just prior to the taking of holy vows.

Now all that remains is the final ratification of the covenant. But, like most things in life, it is delayed, and in the agonizing wait, Abram has to change roles from covenant preparer to defender.

And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. (15:11)

Many scholars take this action to be Abram symbolically defending his promised inheritance from unclean foreign invaders, as he did in chapter 14. Regardless of the deeper symbolism, for Abram, all it counted for was pained frustration. The necessity to preserve the sanctity of the setting resulted because God was late for his appointment. God’s tardiness creates another test for Abram’s faith. How long did he wait? How much blood and sweat did he expend fending off the attackers? We can’t be sure; we don’t know when Abram began the legal process. Regardless of when it began, it probably seemed endless, because it wasn’t until sunset that anything happened. What follows then is divine mystery.

II. Sleep In Heavenly Peace (15:12-16)

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. (15:12)

As the sun is setting and light gives way to darkness, a deep sleep falls upon Abram. The term, “*sound sleep*” (*tardemah*)⁵ is a technical term that was used of the deep sleep that God caused to fall upon Adam before he removed his rib (Gen. 2:21). Later, it will be used by God prior to giving intimate revelations (Gen 15:12; Job 4:13; Dan 8:18). We can think of it as a divine drug. The “terror” and “great darkness” both suggest “awe-inspiring divine activity” (Wenham). In this state, Abram will be propelled into the future of Israel’s deep darkness so that that he might comprehend the mystery of how and when the promise will be fulfilled.

And God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.” (15:13-16)

In answer to Abram’s cry for assurance, “How will I know I will inherit it?” God’s answer comes ringing right

back, “*Knowing you shall know.*” But the painful irony is that the assurance that Abram longs for cannot be given without the certainty of *knowing* the process. “*Know this for sure*”: Israel’s possession of the land will not be easy; it will be riddled with obstacles. Abram’s seed will follow in his footsteps. As he was an alien in the land, so his children will be aliens in a strange land. And things will get worse. Not only will they be aliens: unlike Abram, they will be oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. He is seeking assurance, but here he learns that things are going to get worse before they get better.

Such is the realistic view given to all who desire to walk by faith. As assuredly as the promises of God are ours to rejoice in, so too is the agonizing process that is ours to humbly accept. The first requires faith, the second, faith — and patience. But the end will come. The good news is that God will judge. Just as he judged Pharaoh and made Abram rich in Egypt, so he will not only rescue Israel, he will plunder Egypt and make Israel exceedingly rich. The remarkable education of Moses was one of the many riches that Israel gained in Egypt, which was the “Harvard” or “Stanford” of its day. The Egyptians were not only world renowned for their architectural genius, they also possessed literary gifts that gave shape to the most meticulous scribes in the history of the world. Moses trained in that world, and much of the literary beauty and careful artistry that permeates the Torah had its origins in Egypt.

So God will judge Israel’s oppressor and make Israel rich. Then God adds a kind word to the patriarch. As for Abram, he will die in *peace*. This is the first time the word *shalom* appears in the Bible. It possesses the idea of *completeness* and *wholeness*. When Abram goes into the grave, he will do so with the satisfaction of having had a very full life. But he will die without seeing the promises, because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet *complete* (*shalem*, the same root as *shalom*).

Now we learn that one of the divine purposes behind Israel’s possession of the land was to exercise judgement. And God will not hurry justice, for justice is absolute.⁶ Israel would have to wait and suffer until the time was ripe. As Sarna comments, “*Divine justice was not to be strained even for the elect of God.*”⁷ So for four more generations, or 400 years (100 years being more or less the span of one lifetime), Israel would have to wait. God often waits for the fruit to rot on the tree before taking an axe to the roots. Just because Israel was a tool of judgment did not exempt her from the same judgment. As Moses wrote, “*So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you,*” (Lev 18:28, JPS). After 400 years of silence following Israel’s exile, that same prophetic word came to Israel from John the Baptist: “*The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*” (Matt 3:10).

What this further suggests is that if Abram will go to his grave without seeing the promises, then there must be a resurrection, otherwise what good are promises fulfilled to a man who has been dead for centuries? This is Jesus’ argument with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection:

“But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken.” (Mark

12:26-27)

So while Abram sleeps, God will work to bring about what he had promised, and in the resurrection, Abram will receive everything. This gives Abram a very long view of life. This then is the message that Abram receives at sunset as he is propelled into deep darkness.

In the next scene, more time has elapsed and the creation has “caught up” to the darkness of Abram’s dream-like state. Now, out of the deep darkness a bright light appears.

III. The Everlasting Light (15:17-21)

And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.* (15:17)

In the last scene it was sunset when Abram was thrust into a deep darkness, propelling him forward to gaze into the future. Now the creation catches up to his state as the sunset gives way to complete darkness. Out of the blackness a fiery light appears. Abram sees a smoking oven (actually a large earthenware jar: “Dough stuck to the side and was then baked by putting charcoal inside the jar or putting the jar near the fire.”⁸) and a fiery torch. Commenting on the reality behind these symbols, Alter best preserves the unapproachable mystery:

All this is mystifying and is surely meant to be so, in keeping with the haunting mystery of the covenantal moment. It seems unwise to ‘translate’ the images into any neat symbolism...There may be some general association of smoke and fire with the biblical deity..., and the pillars of fire and cloud in Exodus also come to mind, but the disembodied brazier...and torch are wonderfully peculiar to this scene. The firelight in this preternatural after-sunset darkness is a piquant antithesis to the star-studded heavens of the previous scene.⁹

Behind the fire and smoke, Abram is beginning to grasp God’s unapproachable holiness and burning zeal. In the darkness, nothing else can be seen passing between the animals except these fiery elements. The burning metaphor has made its point with fiery clarity. The fulfillment of this covenant depends solely on one party’s faithfulness: God’s. He and he alone will bring it to completion, without any help from man. This transcends any human covenant in existence. We can hear this imagery echoing in the familiar Christmas carol:

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by:
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

So holy is this scene we are not allowed a second glimpse of it. Without pausing, the narrator immediately thrusts us forward into the future, and from that vantage point we are taken in what happened as if it were already past.

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying

**“To your descendants I have given this land,
From the river of Egypt as far as the great river,**

the river Euphrates:

the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.” (15:18-21)

And so we hear the solemn announcement that ratifies everything: “On that day the LORD made (lit. “cut”) a covenant with Abram.” Now, as the covenantal legal proceedings are concluded, there is a subtle but powerful change in verb tenses. The “*I will give*” of previous promises becomes “*I have given*” (15:18) in the covenant. For the first time the promise is stated with a verb tense that indicates the action is already complete — just as when we receive a deed for new property, the covenant marks the actual transference of real ownership. Abram can now go to his grave with the title deed in hand. As Sarna explains, “The future conquest under Joshua, in the biblical view, was but the conversion of ownership into possession.”¹⁰

Adding to Abram’s assurance, God spells out the boundaries of this land, together with a complete list of peoples who will be dispossessed in the process. The delineation of boundaries played a crucial part in any legal land grant.¹¹ The boundaries, though delineated in general terms, expand Abram’s hopes in a north-south framework.¹² Only for a brief moment during Solomon’s day (1 Kgs 4:21) did Israel even come close to possessing the land in these dimensions. Following the boundaries of the land, God lists ten groupings of pre-Israelite inhabitants whom Abram’s seed will dispossess. This list of former inhabitants is longer than any other grouping (they usually consist of six or seven groups), perhaps suggesting how powerful Abram’s seed will be. So Abram can lie down in peace, knowing that the destiny of his people is sure. The process may be long and difficult but the end will be glorious. That is the assurance granted the patriarch.

Let me conclude with three observations about God’s gift of covenant to Abram and the implications of that for our joy.

IV. The Gift of Covenant

A. God’s Covenant Is Unilateral – It Anchors Our Joy

First, and most important, the nature of God’s covenant was unique in the ancient Near East. There are not two parties here who take an oath, there is only one. That is astounding good news. God’s covenant with his people is absolutely unilateral. This truth is the bedrock of our joy: the inner excitement that God is at work in our lives, and the results are guaranteed.

But the sequential drama that precedes this revelation may indicate how difficult it is for God’s people to understand this. In Abram’s case, it required what for him must have seemed like an eternity of frustration before he was able to see or perceive it. By midday, perhaps, he was ready to seal the promise with God, but there was only silence and a quaking absence. Time droned on, and then the sanctity of the whole setting was threatened by the invading vultures that Abram had to battle. Bloodied and exhausted by his efforts, the sun began to set and the evening sky turned a bright red. Waiting was exhausting work, but the revelation could not occur before the darkness of the night. As Abram lost strength he entered sleep. To ensure that he would not awaken and attempt to participate in the holy operation, he was dampened with that rare divine prescription drug, *tardemah*.

Abram's story is highly instructive. We give assent to God's unilateral new covenant with our minds, but frequently it takes a long journey into the dark before we "give up" and go to sleep. Perhaps it is only the aged who truly perceive this with their hearts. Looking through an old journal the other day, my eye caught an entry I had written in Jerusalem several years ago:

At forty five
I look out my window of the Old City,
and I want only to see the New City,
to be caught up,
swept away
in what you do, O God.
I give up doing,
let me see and sing.
Amen.

That is the first thing. God's covenant is unilateral, but it takes a divine miracle to enable us to see it.

B. God's Covenant Is Received By Faith and Patience – It Delays and Expands our Joy

The second observation I would make is that assurance of hope is not merely granted in the seeing of the promise, but in the revelation of the *process* by which the promise comes. The author of Hebrews says, "We desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb 6:11-12).

It is through faith and patience that we acquire the promise. As we reflect on Advent and on God fulfilling his promise to give Abram a seed, we are enthralled by the angelic announcement to Mary and the glory of angels around Bethlehem's field. But let us not forget the delays, the obstacles and brutalities that accompanied it. The visitation of the angel to Mary placed her reputation in the throes of disgrace, threatening her engagement to Joseph. The secluded joy of her pregnancy was dashed by the perilous journey to Bethlehem, just when she was close to full term. In order to obey Roman law, Joseph put his whole family at risk. They received no medical care, and were hardly able to find an adequate bed. The child's first crib was a stone feeding trough lined with the saliva of oxen and sheep. We sing *Good Christian Men Rejoice*, but let us remember that the reigning king of that day did not rejoice. Soon he would trample Bethlehem in a bloodbath, as every male child under two was slaughtered. Most mothers in Bethlehem did not rejoice that year, they wept. The only safe refuge the couple could find was Egypt, as Matthew said, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son" (Matt 2:15, NRSV).

Just because the covenant is unilateral doesn't mean its fulfillment will be quick and easy. No, it will be a long, agonizing process, of that we can be sure. But this does two things for us. First, our suffering and sorrow actually increase our capacity for joy when fulfillment comes at last. Second, like Abram, we are forced to take the longest view of life. Like him, we will go to our graves not seeing the fulfillment of everything. But God will continue to faithfully work out his loyal love on our behalf, perhaps for thou-

sands of generations. Finally, on that day of the resurrection, we will experience everything that God promised. On that day our joy will be as expansive as the new earth we walk upon, and it will be pure and unadulterated. So God establishes our joy in the promise of covenant, but then he enlarges it in hope through the long process of suffering.

But where does that leave us in the present?

C. God's Covenant Future Can Be Enjoyed Now

Like Abram, we are promised a bright future. As it was for Abram, so for us the promise of land is amplified beyond our wildest imaginations. The expansive land promised to him is further enlarged by the prophets following Israel's exile: "For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess *nations*" (Isa 54:3). And, as Christ affirmed, there will be no boundaries of holiness in the resurrection, for the meek "*shall inherit the earth*" (Matt 5:5). But though the ultimate fulfillment still awaits us, the gift of the Holy Spirit allows us to participate in it now. That is why Peter says, "though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with *joy* inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet 1:8). Thus, each time we gather for worship the promise is that we are to taste the life of that heavenly city. As the author of Hebrews says:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Heb 12:22-24)

Given the nature of God's covenant, I pray that joy will be the hallmark of our lives. Amen.

1. Scholars have noted this similarity with Hittite suzerainty treaties, graciously offered by a superior monarch to an inferior. "The superior king, as suzerain, stipulated his conditions to his vassal, the inferior ruler and his nation. In return for their loyalty and tribute, the suzerain would protect his vassal against enemy attack. However, should the vassal breach the stipulations of the covenant, then the suzerain would withdraw his military protection and might also punish the rebelling vassal by an invasion." Temba L. J. Mafico, "Ethics," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:647 (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
2. See Exod 6:7; 20:2; Lev 19:36; 22:33; 25:38; 26:13; Num 15:41; Deut 5:6; 8:14; 13:10.
3. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 65.
4. Robert Alter, *Genesis*, 65, explains that "existing translations fudge the vivid anthropomorphism of the Hebrew here: '*ish*, literally, 'man,' means 'each' but is a word applied to animate beings, not to things, so it must refer to the two parties to the covenant facing each other, not to the animal parts."
5. For a complete listing of this term as a noun see Gen 2:21; 15:12; Isa 29:10; Job 4:13; 33:15; Prov 19:15; As a verb (*radam*) see Judg 4:21; Jonah 1:5-6; Ps 76:7; Prov 10:5; Dan 8:18; 10:9.
6. Israel was not exempt from the same judgment. The fact that she was a tool of judgement gave her no inherent superiority (see Deut 9:4-6).
7. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 124.
8. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987), 332.
9. Alter, *Genesis*, 66.
10. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 124.
11. Weinfeld, quoted in Wenham, *Genesis*, 333.
12. "It is not clear whether 'river of Egypt' is an alternative name for Wadi el Arish [Simons] or means the eastern branch of the Nile delta [Aharoni]" (Wenham, *Genesis*, 333).