

The Story (29) – Recap and Covenants

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This is the last class in the series titled "The Story," our look at the Bible's big picture. I want to give a brief recap of the storyline of Scripture and in the process say a word about the major covenants that God entered into with people in the unfolding of this story.

I. Creation and Adam

A. Scripture begins with God creating everything over six days in the beginning. As it originally came from God, creation was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Humans were created uniquely in the image of God and were given a place of special importance within the purposes of God, including the authority to rule the earth. It was an idyllic and blessed existence in which all things were functioning in the way God desired. There was no death, and Adam and Eve, the first humans, were in harmony with God, each other, and the rest of creation.

B. The term "covenant" carries with it the idea of "pact" or "agreement." When made between unequals in the ancient world, the superior typically promised blessings and protection and the inferior pledged loyalty and submission.

C. Though the word "covenant" (*bĕrît*) is not used until the story of Noah (first at Gen. 6:18), there are reasons to think there is a covenant between God and Adam as a representative of the human race and *all of creation*, so that God deals with *creation* on the basis of how he deals with mankind. The elements of God's providing, sustaining, and blessing and mankind's duty of faithful submission, with specified sanctions for disobedience, look like a Lord/vassal covenant.

D. When Adam and Eve rejected God's rule by disobeying him, God's very good creation was corrupted or spoiled. Humans were alienated from God and each other and also were alienated from creation as a result of God's cursing the ground so that it would now be in rebellion to mankind as mankind was in rebellion to God. And as the Spirit makes clear much later in Rom. 8:19-23, the effect of this Fall was cosmic in scope; all creation was subjected to futility and subjected to the bondage of corruption.

E. But in the midst of this bad news, a ray of hope is provided in Gen. 3:15. It speaks of one man (he, singular), a descendant of Eve, who shall strike or bruise the head of the serpent (your, singular). The conflict that is playing out ends with Christ, the God-man, prevailing over Satan, the fallen spirit-being who animated the serpent in the garden.

II. Noah

A. Noah is introduced through the genealogy in chapter 5 as a descendant of Adam through Seth. And then in chapter 6 we see that the sin Adam let loose on the human world has thoroughly corrupted God's very good creation.

B. God justly and rightly brought a cataclysmic flood through which he destroyed the earth and killed everything on dry land in whose *nostrils* was the breath of life (Gen. 7:22). He, of course, had mercy on righteous Noah, calling him to build an ark through which he and seven others in his family and representatives (breeding pairs) of the various kinds of land animals and birds were spared.

C. Afterward, God entered into a covenant with Noah and all the creatures that came out of the ark promising that he would never again bring a global flood.

1. It is possible, as Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum argue in *Kingdom Through Covenant*, that the covenant with Noah is not entirely new but is rather a *reassertion* of the prior covenant with Adam which included implicitly a commitment, conditioned on mankind's faithfulness, to preserve and protect creation as part of the overall blessing of mankind. The flood was a judgment brought on by mankind's wickedness, its rebellion against God.

2. After the flood, the prior commitment to creation is reasserted with a refinement, with the more specific commitment that even though man is inclined toward evil from his youth (Gen. 8:21) God will never again destroy the whole earth with a flood. In other words, God in his mercy will not repeat that judgment *despite our ongoing wickedness*; his preservation and protection of creation will now include that specific promise.

III. Abraham

A. Given that Sin passed through the flood with Noah and his relatives, some kind of extraordinary work was going to be necessary to heal the sin-sick world, to restore the broken creation that it might be all that God intends it to be. And that work began to take shape in the calling of Abram (later Abraham) in Genesis 12. God calls this man and enters into a covenant with him wherein he promises to bless him with a multitude of descendants living securely in a bountiful homeland, which serves as type for the redeemed creation, and promises to bless *all the nations of the world through him*.

B. The veiled statement of Gen. 3:15 that a man, a descendant of Eve, would win the ultimate victory over Satan is now narrowed by God's election of Abraham. Of all the people of all the nations, this Messiah who would bless the world through the defeat of Satan is going to come in the lineage of Abraham. And, of course, this line is further traced through Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 26:4 – in your offspring all nations of the earth shall be blessed), through Isaac's son Jacob/Israel (Gen. 28:14 – in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed), through Jacob's son Judah (Gen. 49:8-10), and through Judah's descendant David.

C. Paul says in Gal. 3:16 that the promises were spoken to Abraham "and to his *seed*," the singular form of which identifies Christ as being in some sense the descendant of Abraham to

whom the covenant blessings were promised. The implication is that one only shares in those blessings through one's relationship with Christ, through identification with THE seed.

1. It is through faith in him, through trusting God's testimony about who Jesus is, that one imitates the faith of Abraham and thus becomes one of Abraham's sons or daughters, heirs of the promised inheritance. So Christ is the procurer and the portal of the promised blessings, the one through whom the nations will be blessed.

2. You can see this idea in Gal. 3:6-9, 29 – ⁶*Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* ⁷*You know, then, that those of faith are the sons of Abraham.* ⁸*And the Scripture foreseeing that God would pronounce the Gentiles righteous by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, [saying] that "All the nations will be blessed in you."* ⁹*So then, those of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. . . .* ²⁹*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise.* (See also, Rom. 4:13-17).

D. The coming of Jesus is also connected to the Abrahamic covenant in Lk. 1:54-55, 69-75; Acts 3:24-26. As with the Mosaic Covenant I will mention in a moment, the Abrahamic covenant finds its end or goal in Jesus. He fulfills all prior covenants "by bringing to pass what those previous covenants revealed, anticipated, and even predicted through various patterns, types, and instruction" (Gentry and Wellum, 604). So the new covenant he instituted supersedes all prior covenants.

IV. David

A. Of course, Jesus is not only a descendant of Abraham through the line of Isaac, Jacob, and Judah; he is also a descendant of the great King David. This is significant because just over a thousand years after Abraham and many centuries after Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, God further narrowed the lineage of the Messiah by entering into a covenant with Israel's King David.

B. In 2 Samuel 7, God tells David that instead of David building him a house, he was going to build a house for David, by which he meant he would establish an eternal ruling dynasty of David's descendants. The right to rule would never be removed from David's family as it had been from Saul's, a point God emphasizes in Psalm 89.

C. Note that God makes clear in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89 that he would punish David's faithless descendants, and we see that happen at times throughout Israelite history, but that is different from removing the right to rule from David's family. Jesus is the immortal descendant of David who has been placed by God permanently on David's throne (see, e.g., Lk. 1:29-33; Acts 2:29-36) in fulfillment of that covenant.

V. Moses

A. Now in between the covenant God made with Abraham around 2050 B.C. and the covenant he made with David around 1000 B.C., God at Mount Sinai, after the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, entered into a covenant with the people of Israel (Ex. 20:1 - 24:8). This was around

1446 B.C. Moses was the "point man" for Israel in this process, which is why it is sometimes called the Mosaic Covenant.

B. The Mosaic covenant was an interim, subsidiary covenant given until God's promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled in Christ. It specified the way in which the faith of God's people was to be expressed until Christ came. Its temporary nature is evident in Gal. 3:15 - 4:7 and 2 Cor. 3:4-18; see also, Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:11-12. The fact the Mosaic covenant was subsidiary to the Abrahamic covenant and did not cancel it out is clear from Paul's statements in Gal. 3:15-18.

C. Spiritual life, salvation, under the Mosaic covenant was by faith not by keeping the commands (the "law"). It was the gracious provision of God bestowed on those of genuine faith, which faith naturally and inevitably expressed itself in obedience, and repentance at failure, including offering of the prescribed sacrifices in conjunction with which forgiveness was provided (e.g., Leviticus 4-6, 17:11, 19:22; Number 15). That is why Paul in Rom. 4:6-8 can cite David, who lived under the law, in support of the idea that justification is by faith. And it is why he (and the writer of Hebrews) can cite Hab. 2:4 in support of the idea that righteousness is by faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The list of O.T. saints in Hebrews 11 confirms the crucial role of faith in pleasing God under the old covenant.

D. Of course, the sacrifices prescribed under the old covenant were only a shadow of the true atoning sacrifice on which all divine forgiveness is based (Heb. 10:1-4). God forgave sins under that covenant on credit, so to speak, because Christ, the true efficacious sacrifice to which all the shadows of the old covenant pointed, was coming into the world. And because Christ's sacrifice is the reality rather than a shadow, the forgiveness available under the new covenant surpasses that available under the old in that the blood of Christ *utterly* purifies, purifies even our *consciences* from sin that we might serve God in a greater state of intimacy (Heb. 9:8-14).

E. Though the Mosaic covenant was an interim, subsidiary covenant which was given until God's earlier promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled in Christ, some Jews gave it priority over the Abrahamic covenant and exalted it to the point that the works of the law, the commands that were part of the Mosaic covenant, became the basis of one's relationship with God and thus the basis of one's inheritance (Lk. 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27 - 4:8, 9:30 - 10:8; Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Phil. 3:2-11). In other words, some turned the Mosaic law into a legalistic path of salvation. Making salvation something gained by works impermissibly changed the prior and ongoing Abrahamic covenant by canceling out its promissory character (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-18).

F. The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin when God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements *from creation*, a fact to which Noah's flood bears solemn witness. Those moral requirements had not been given as "law," had not been laid down as specific, express commandments, but they were known intuitively or innately as part of the law written by God on the human heart (see Rom. 2:15), and violating them was sin. In other words, the existence of "law," specific edicts to be obeyed, is not necessary for sin to occur. That is why Paul can say in Rom. 2:12, "For as many as *sinned without the law* will also perish without the law" and say in Rom. 5:13a that sin was in the world

before (until) the law was given. ("Transgression," however, is a different story. To *transgress* is to violate the will of God *as revealed in an express commandment*, but I do not have time to elaborate.)

G. Some of the commands in the Mosaic covenant were peculiarly covenantal, meaning they were not universal moral desires of God. They erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably (at least in part) to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God. A distinction between the commandments of the law is evident in 1 Cor. 7:19 (TNIV): Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.

VI. New Covenant

A. A new covenant was instituted between God and mankind through the sacrifice of Christ, the effect of which was to render the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). And with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the *set of commands* that were part of that covenant, the Mosaic law, ceased to be binding. That the Mosaic law ceased to be binding is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14 but also from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law — such as Sabbath regulations, food laws, and circumcision — are said to be no longer binding. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

B. Though the set of commands that constitute the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the individual commands included in that law have an ongoing or renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant. For example, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in N.T. commands and prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting. Indeed, there are literally hundreds of commands in the N.T. – dos and don'ts – issued by Spirit-inspired writers.

C. The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). This ongoing moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

D. Because the commands of the Mosaic law relating to circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days, ritual purity laws, and food laws are not part of the law of Christ (see Mat. 15:16-20; Mk. 7:18-19, indicating that the rules of ritual contamination are removed), not something Christians are required to obey (other than as an accommodation), Christ's ending

of the Mosaic law ended the requirements that created the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In this way, he created one new man out of the two, which is Paul's point in Eph. 2:14-18.