

The Covenant Fulfilled

SCOTT HOEZEE

A recent survey showed that even among church-going folks, recent years have seen a sharp decline in conversations about faith and spirituality. As a result, even common biblical words like *salvation* and *compassion* are not understood by many people now. Well, if so, then certainly the word *covenant* may be less familiar to people today; but in the Bible, covenant is a core concept—it is a huge biblical theme; and it leads straight to what we celebrate at Christmas each year, too. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore God's covenant with us. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the third of four episodes of our Advent series this year, where we have been looking at Advent and Christmas, but not from the parts of the Bible we usually associate with Christmas—Luke 2 or Matthew 1 and 2—but from other parts of the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we began in our first program by looking at Genesis Chapter 3, a passage that we have dealt with several times on *Groundwork*, and the so-called *protoevangelium*, or the pre-Gospel announcement of a child who would come...a descendent of Eve who would ultimately deal with the serpent, crushing his head, overthrowing evil, and bringing salvation to the world; and then we turned, in our last program, to the book of Psalms and their great theme of the coming king, who will judge the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the final program—our next one—we will go to the very end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, to look at an intriguing passage there that gives us a very, very different angle on the birth story of Jesus in Bethlehem; but today, we want to think about this thing called covenant, which probably does not sound very Advent-like or very Christmasy, but we want to look at covenant today, not just kind of out of a biblical, historical curiosity to, you know, gain more information; but as we have been saying in this whole series, I think our celebration of Christmas this year will be widened and deepened if we can see how many major, major biblical themes and movements really all come together and gel in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; but, we just said a minute ago, Dave, that covenant may not be as familiar a word. So, let's spend a few minutes in the first part of this program kind of defining what is a covenant in the Bible?

DAVE BAST

Yes; actually, people are more familiar with it than they realize, because a synonym for covenant is *testament* ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we all are familiar, I trust, with the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament; so really, when we are talking about those two sections of the Bible, we are talking about the old covenant and the new covenant, which are two kind of parts of the same coin, in a sense...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

The basic idea of covenant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and maybe a more familiar word than either covenant...or even testament...is the word *contract*, and that is something we do know about, right? So, we recently hired some people to fix something at our house, and once we agreed to it, we signed a contract. I signed the contract, the man who owns the repair company signed the contract; they said what they would do; they would replace things, they would clean up after themselves; and I said: I will pay you. So, a contract or a covenant is an agreement...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Between two people—two parties.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and it is also, much like a contract, an agreement that is formalized in some way with some kind of ritual. You know, you can have an oral contract...you can have a more simple, basic agreement, and it is a handshake deal, as we say. You don't really have to fill out the paperwork, we trust one another; let's just shake on it. But, as you point out, in a more formal setting—a business setting—you are going to have a written kind of an agreement that you both sign, and you are going to be held to it; and in the Bible, covenants are almost always, if not always, accompanied with some kind of ritual or some kind of custom or practice...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Something sacramental that is a sign of the covenant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and the more important a covenant or a contract is, the more the ritual is formalized; so, if you hire somebody to repair your bathroom, you are just going to sign one piece of paper. You get a mortgage from the bank for your house, you are going to sign your name about 58 times by the time you are done, because it is serious; but in the Bible when we are talking about covenant, there are two main types, and both of them are going to be part of this program, so we need to know what they are. The first one has kind of an odd sounding name from the ancient Near East. It is called a *suzerain vassal* covenant; and what that means is this is a covenant made between a powerful person and a less powerful person. So, maybe it is a king who says to a relatively poor person: I am going to provide you with a place to live...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am going to give you some land on which you can grow crops; and in return, you are going to pay me taxes and I want a share of your crops; so, I am going to give you something and you are going to give me something back. So, in a suzerain vassal, it is sort of: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours; you do something, I do something, and it is a partnership. That is one kind of covenant in the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is another kind, though, that is called...or sometimes referred to, at least, as the *royal land grant*, and that is basically a one-sided promise, where the king or other powerful person just simply out of grace says: I am going to give you this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

This is going to be yours; and in the Bible, we are going to look at a number of different passages in this program from different parts of the Bible, a lot of them from the Old Testament; but there is a wonderful passage that describes this grace-giving kind of covenant in Genesis Chapter 15.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, this involves Abram, or Abraham, as he became known later. So, here is Genesis 15: After this, the Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ²But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me, since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." ⁴And then the Word of the Lord came to him, "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."

DAVE BAST

⁵He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. ¹⁸On that day, God made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendents I give this land."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is that royal...literally a land grant in this case...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and also, Paul's favorite verse from the whole Old Testament, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...

DAVE BAST

Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness—justification by faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; now, we did hear a little bit of covenant language earlier in the Bible. We didn't mention that, but in the story of Noah, after the flood, God makes a covenant that he won't do that again; but the big covenant that we really want to focus on, because it is going to lead us straight to the Christmas story, is this one...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That starts in Genesis 15; again, it is covenant of grace...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a covenant of sheer gift. Abraham did not deserve it; the promise came to him from out of a clear blue sky. He just believed God and God said: You are a righteous man, and I am just going to give this to you.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and actually, it is built on something that happens earlier in Genesis, in Genesis 12. This is a foundational passage that we have often made reference to, but God told Abram: Leave your home, go out to a place I will show you, and I am going to give you a child, and I am going to give you land. So, there is a double promise; and now, many years have passed, and God comes, in Genesis 15, and repeats that initial promise of a child...and not just one child, but many, many descendents...and a land for them to live in; and Abraham says: Uh, excuse me. Time out; God, you know, I still haven't had the child—where is the promise? And God doubles down with Abram, and he says: Look up at the sky. Look at all those stars. That is how many children you are going to have; and Abraham, despite appearances to the contrary, accepts God's promise—puts his faith in it—and thus, is declared to be righteous.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and among those descendents, ultimately, we believe, will be that child who was born in Bethlehem; which brings us right to Christmas; and how we get to that, we are going to consider more of that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we just read a passage from Genesis 15, in which God makes a covenant—he makes a promise—a contract—with Abraham that he is going to have many, many descendents, who are going to inherit a wonderful land. So, we read from Genesis 15, but right in the middle of that chapter we skipped this part, but something really interesting happens in the middle of that chapter.

DAVE BAST

Yes; a very weird scene ensues, where God says... We mentioned earlier that covenants had to have a kind of ritual that went with them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, as we sign the contract, in this case to ratify the covenant that God makes with Abram, he tells Abram to take a bunch of animals, kill them, cut the bodies in half, line them up in two rows, kind of like the markers on the edge of a runway...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

The plan will be then that they will walk through that path...both parties to the covenant will walk down that aisle, and the message is: Look, if I break this covenant—if I fail to keep my promise to you—then let it happen to me as has happened to these animals...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Let me be destroyed and killed and whatever...in horrible ways.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and this was indeed in the ancient Near East kind of the equivalent of signing on the dotted line of a contract today. This was the formal ritual. It was called cutting a covenant, and by passing through it, the person says: If I don't keep my promise, I am dead. I will die if I don't keep my promise; and God is the one who says it here. Abram kind of falls into a deep sleep, and he doesn't actually walk through the animals; but God—the presence of God—does; and so, God is saying: I will die if this does not work out. We will just keep that in mind for now. We are going to come back to that; but first, we want to see another covenant in Genesis, just two chapters forward from Genesis 15, from Genesis 17.

DAVE BAST

So, God once more has shown up. He is speaking to Abraham, and he says: ⁹“As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendents after you, for the generations to come. ¹⁰This is my covenant with you and your descendents after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, now that starts to sound like that *other* kind of covenant, where both parties have to do something to keep the arrangement alive; and so, in this case, Abraham and his descendents are going to have to be holy, they are going to have to live God-glorifying lives, and they are going to have to have this kind of sacrament that they observe throughout all generations, the sacrament of circumcision. So, how do you put those two together? So, we had Genesis 15, which was the royal land grant, grace out of the clear blue sky, a sheer gift; and now, we've got more of a conditional one. How do we keep those together?

DAVE BAST

Well, right; those two kinds of covenants really do go together. The unconditional covenant of grace, the sheer promise covenant, and the more conditional covenant that calls forth obedience; because, the thing of it is with grace, there is always a temptation to say, well then, it doesn't matter how you live...it doesn't matter what you do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, what a great deal!

DAVE BAST

Yes; Paul actually addresses this in Romans 6, after he has gone through the story of Abraham and these covenants and the righteousness by faith, he says: Well then, should we just sin so that grace may abound? And Paul says: By no means; absolutely not! Because grace calls us to a life of grateful living—of obedience to God; and that is where the second kind of covenant comes in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, what we have established already super early in the Bible is that God has made a promise that he said: I am going to keep this promise or die; and the people have made a promise to say: We will live holy and God-glorifying lives in return; so this, now, will keep coming up all through the Old Testament. When we get to Mount Sinai and the giving of the Law with Moses and the Ten Commandments, that was part of

the covenant. That was kind of showing what the peoples' part of that covenant from Genesis 17 was going to be; and it also keeps coming up in the Bible that there all kinds of times when God gets a little fed up with Israel, and then you read lines like: But then God remembered his covenant with Abraham and he relented from his anger; so, the covenant also keeps God on track; but unfortunately...and of course, it also comes up, and we saw this in the first program in this series...we made mention of this...God makes a further covenant with David, and says: You will always have a son of David on the throne; and that also is going to point straight to the ultimate Son of David; but the bad news, Dave, is that ultimately, before the Old Testament is finished, it is clear that from Israel's side of things, they completely failed their part of the bargain.

DAVE BAST

Right; and when we come to the prophetic books toward the end of the Old Testament—the great major prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—the minor prophets, so-called, beginning with Hosea—the theme that emerges again and again and again is: You have broken my covenant, you failed to keep it, you haven't been my people, you haven't belonged to me, you have gone after other gods. So, to take Hosea as a prime example, Hosea's wife is unfaithful to him, and that is a parable for God's relationship to Israel. Israel was like his wife...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he did everything for her, and she went off with another guy. You know, that is what it means. It breaks God's heart when his people break his covenant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, here is a summary idea from...this is from Ezekiel 16, but you could find this all through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel...this kind of thing. Here is Ezekiel 16:59:

This is what the sovereign Lord says, "I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. ⁶⁰Yet, I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you."

So, God said back in Genesis 15: I am going to keep this thing if it kills me; and now it looks like it is going to kill him, because God now realizes he is going to have to keep both the divine and the human side of this if this is ever going to work.

DAVE BAST

That is exactly right. I think that is the underlying message that we get from that amazing scene in Genesis 15. So, God is walking through this line of cut-apart animals. The text of Genesis says that there was a smoky pot that was moving back and forth through that line. Think pillar of cloud/pillar of fire. It is a symbol of God's presence; but meanwhile, Abraham is just sort of sitting there in a stupor. He does not do his part of the covenant; and it is as though God is saying: You know what, Abraham? Here is my promise to you. I want you and your descendants to live for me, to obey me, but I know you won't—I know you cannot do that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I am going to keep both parts—I am going to keep my part of the covenant, and I am going to keep your part of the covenant for you; and what does that set up when we come to the New Testament? Well, it sets up the Christmas story; and we will look at that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this third program in a four-part Advent series, where we are looking at Christmas through the lens of texts from other parts of the Bible than the classic Christmas stories we find in the New Testament; and today, Dave, we have been looking at the whole Bible, because we have been considering a Bible-wide theme of God's covenant; that early on, God promised he would save the world through the descendents of Abraham. God has decided...and maybe knew even from the get-go that if this was ever going to work, he would probably have to keep both ends of the agreement—the divine side—his side—and the human side; and indeed, when you get into the promises in the latter part of the book of Isaiah, like in Isaiah 54, God has said: Yes, I have been angry with you and you have gone into exile, but...then God says in Isaiah 54:

¹⁰“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

My covenant of peace will not be removed; you don't deserve it, but I am going to do it; which is also why you get an Isaiah 40, where Isaiah takes that turn: Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord, because I am going to take care of things for you; and that actually...that whole idea of comfort kind of leads us to a well-known story in Luke Chapter 2.

DAVE BAST

Luke 2, we have said before, is where we find the heart of the Christmas story: The angels singing about the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem, the shepherds coming from the fields; but it goes on toward the end of that chapter to talk about Jesus' presentation in the Temple. So, Joseph and Mary bring this baby on the appropriate day to fulfill the obligations of the covenant; there again, he has been circumcised, and he is going to be presented because he is the firstborn for their family, and so, he has to be dedicated to the Lord; and as they come, there is a priest there called Simeon, an old man

^{25ff}who was righteous and devout (Luke writes). He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the Temple courts; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying...

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁹“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, ³²a light of revelation to the gentiles, and the glory of your people, Israel.”

Isaiah, in Isaiah 40, declared: Comfort, comfort my people. Simeon has been waiting for that comfort, that consolation, and here it is. He now sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the covenant, as I think Paul later in the New Testament will go on to say, Simeon recognized something, Paul will write about that, all of God's promises found their “yes” in Jesus, who is the Christ and the Messiah; which is also why, 20 chapters later in Luke, in Luke 22, at the Last Supper, Jesus transforms the Passover meal into a new sacrament.

¹⁹He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰And in the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

DAVE BAST

We said earlier that we talk about the Old Testament and the New Testament...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or the old covenant and the new covenant, and in doing that, we are picking up on the language of Jesus himself. He said: I have come to inaugurate a new covenant. That was not his idea totally, because in the Old

Testament the Lord himself had prophesied that he would offer a new covenant to his people, and this is picked up on...actually, that is from Jeremiah 31, but it is picked up on by the writer to the Hebrews in Chapter 8, where he says:

⁷If there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another, ⁸but God found fault with the people and said, “The days are coming...” (here he is quoting Jeremiah) “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.”

It will be different, he says, because it will be written on their hearts—it will be internal; and it will be flowing from the work that Jesus did on our behalf. He was the perfect covenant keeper.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Covenant in his blood. God said: I am going to keep this covenant if it kills me, and through God the Son, it did. He did experience death in keeping the covenant in the long run. We sing that song: *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*, and there is a line in that song: The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee this night; and what it turns out is that all those hopes and fears are covenant hopes and fears in the Bible—covenant promises. So, when we think about the birth of Jesus this year, when we go to church and celebrate Christmas, here is another way to widen out our appreciation for all of what that birth in Bethlehem meant. It meant promises God made already in Genesis 12 and 15 and 17 were all kept; and that just...I think that gives me a sense of great awe in terms of what we actually are doing at Christmas. This is not a little story; this is *the* story.

DAVE BAST

It is a huge story, in which God is the hero from beginning to end. You know, you mentioned, Scott, a moment ago, communion, and the words that we often remember or repeat at communion that Jesus spoke at table at the Last Supper, and some churches actually celebrate communion on Christmas, or on Christmas Eve, and maybe you think: Well, that is kind of odd, really. Doesn't that belong more in Holy Week and Good Friday or Maundy Thursday? That is when communion belongs, but Christmas is such a happy time—it is such a peaceful, gentle time. Why are you bringing Jesus' death in here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we like to keep births and deaths quite separate; and in fact, we often say if somebody dies anywhere near Christmas: Oh, that poor family! Their Christmas is ruined. So, some people think: Celebrating the Lord's Supper on Christmas Day? Celebrating the chopped up body and spilled out blood of Jesus in front of the Christmas tree? That is kind of silly; but it isn't, because that is the reason he was born, so that a new covenant—the one Jeremiah had predicted and that you just read about, Dave, from Hebrews 8—that new covenant would become a part of us forever, as God promised.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, how could God keep his part of the covenant? Pretty easy, in a way. He is God. How could he keep our covenant? That was more of a challenge, wasn't it? It meant he had to become one of us...he had to become human...and that is what we celebrate at Christmas; not just for the sake of being a human, but so that he could obey and fulfill the covenant on our behalf.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with us on *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. We hope you will join us again next time as we study Christmas from the perspective of the book of Revelation.

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