

Exceedingly Fruitful People, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L2060312
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 and Romans 4:13-25
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During this Lenten season, we are talking about covenants, but we hardly know what a covenant is. It is virtually impossible for us to conceive or imagine a relationship built upon little more than a promise reliably made and honorably kept. That is not the way our world works today. We need legal documents. When we buy a house or sign a credit card deal, or purchase a computer program, we must sign a document that has an agreement written out in explicit detail.

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Is it any wonder that we don't know much about the word "covenant?" Except for legal usage, it is unfamiliar to us. It is one of those words one only hears in church. I am willing to bet that the only place you have used the word "covenant" outside of church is in relationship to marriage. We call marriage a "covenant." If fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce, is there any wonder that we have little understanding of the word covenant? Even in marriages, now, we have "pre-nuptial agreements" outlining what property belongs to the bride before the marriage, and what belongs to the groom before the marriage, so that in the event of a divorce, lawyers and judges can decide what properly belongs to whom.

That is not what a covenant was in the Bible. Covenant was a sacred word. It occurs three hundred forty-six times in three hundred twenty-two verses. *Covenant* comes from Hebrew *Berith*. The actual wording in Hebrew is "to cut a covenant." There could be three reasons for this wording, "to cut a covenant"

One: Take an animal, cut it and cook it, and have a feast. Celebrate the covenant that you have made with another.

Two: You have a whole, like a piece of cloth, and you cut it into two pieces. You recognize that there is unity in that the two pieces come from the same origin, the same cloth, but you are clarifying the two pieces of it. This clarifies the boundaries and designates where your responsibilities end and mine begin.

Three: Take an animal and sacrifice it. Cut it in two. This is what will happen to you if you break the covenant!

Perhaps we need to understand covenant in light of what it was like to be under the power of a mighty landowner or king. That king had ultimate power over his subjects. The king would protect his subjects and make sure they were fed and clothed. All he demanded in return was service and loyalty. If you were not loyal, you were dead, like these sacrificial animals.

God does not say to us, "You're dead." God gives us free will. But, we will miss out on God's blessings if we are disloyal and do not serve.

In forming the covenants through Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, God keeps saying to us, "I love you and I want you to be able to receive the blessings in store for you if you live by them."

¹The first few lines of an End User License Agreement from Microsoft

God has a sense of humor. God said to ninety-nine-year-old Abraham and to eighty-nine-year-old Sarah, “You are going to have a baby.”

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”²

So, if we call the covenant with Noah the rainbow covenant, we can call the covenant with Abraham the “Laughing Covenant.” The child that Abraham and Sarah had was named “Isaac,” which means, “He laughed.”³

This was a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of many nations. Their offspring would be a blessing not just to a particular tribe or nation, but to all people.⁴

I am not very sure why God chose Abraham and Sarah to fulfill promises. Was the covenant made with Abraham because he journeyed into Canaan from Haran?⁵ Or because he welcomed three strangers into his tent?⁶ Or because he was willing to sacrifice his son to God?⁷ Or because he erected a stone monument to God at Shechem?⁸

Abraham and Sarah were not particularly deserving people. He had lied twice, saying that his wife was his sister. He divided up the promised land and gave to his nephew Lot the portion that contained Sodom and Gomorrah which would later be destroyed. Sarah became jealous of her slave girl Hagar, and got her husband Abraham to turn his first son and Hagar out into the desert to die of starvation and exposure.

But, God’s way is the way of mercy. A young unmarried Mary receives a promise that she is going to give birth to the Messiah. You and I, imperfect as we are, are chosen by God to live out the covenant, and to be a blessing to the people around us, and to the nations around the world. If you thought you could get out of being God’s servant by not being perfect, think again. God will make use of us *because* of our imperfections.

God said to Abraham, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful.”⁹ Abraham and Sarah became the parents of many nations. Today, Christians, Jews, and Muslims all look to them as the parents of their faiths.

God keeps making promises to us, and asks us simply to love God and love our neighbors. Yet, we keep breaking our side of the covenant. How have we broken the covenant, just this week? God keeps saying to you, “I want you.” Not the way Uncle Sam wanted young recruits for World War I, but simply to want you for you. An old man in a nursing home, with all the wisdom of his years, said with tears in his eyes: “at the benediction, just tell the people to be good, to be nice to each other. That’s what this world needs.”

A covenant: a relationship built upon little more than a promise reliably made and honorably kept. May *our* word be our bond. May we be truthful and mean what we say.

²Genesis 17:17

³Footnote to the name “Isaac” in Genesis 17:19, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

⁴Genesis 22:18

⁵Genesis 12:2-4

⁶Genesis 18:1-12

⁷Genesis 22:15-18

⁸Genesis 12:6-8

⁹Genesis 17:6