

The Story of God and Us: Covenant

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June 21, 2020

Exodus 6:1-8

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land." God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The LORD' I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'"

Exodus 6:1-8 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

Later this year, my wife Dee and I will have been married for 42 years. That's a long time to be married, and over the years there have been some good times and some not so good times. But what we've discovered over time is that we are really bonded together. The Scripture uses the term "one flesh," and it does feel that way. The bonded together by our common commitment to one another. Our common commitment to God. We're bonded together by our history, all the things that we've experienced and gone through together. We're bonded together by five children and 11 grandchildren. There is just this relationship that has been formed, that binds us together.

So today we're talking about covenants, and marriage is a covenant. It is a covenant that binds people together in a relationship of promise. A covenant is a relationship that is bound together by a promise. In fact, the word covenant is sometimes translated *promise*, but that's a much weaker word. Covenant is a vow, a commitment to the soul and of the heart and of the hands to do something. And when we're in covenant with God, we're bound together in this partnership.

It's interesting, in Scripture, there are a number of different images for our relationship with God, but the two most prevalent are of husband and wife, of two lovers perhaps, and the other one is of a parent and of a child. In the Old Testament, sometimes it's most often it's a father and sometimes a mother, but it is a picture of a parent and a child, a familial covenant - a relationship of being bound together. It's not primarily a set of laws or a set of religious practices, it's primarily about this relationship.

We've been sort of looking at the story of God and us, and we began with the idea that we were created to be in relationship with God, we were made in God's image. But that we sinned, and as we did that we separated ourselves from God. We moved away from God. In Genesis 2, we hid in the garden. But God didn't give up on us; God continued to want to be in relationship with us. So the way God did that was to create these covenants, to reach out to God's children, to create these covenants.

There's a term that my daughters taught me many years ago, from the urban dictionary - it's *DTR*. I asked what it meant and was told that it's "Define the Relationship." So you're dating someone, and at some point, you have to "define the relationship" - are we boyfriend/girlfriend or are we just going out on dates, are we just friends, is this going somewhere? What is the actual nature of our relationship?

Well, I think that's what God does in covenants. God says, "I'm going to define this relationship. Here is what we're about." As a way of even though we've strayed away, to try to continue to bind us together into those relationships.

So there are five primary covenants that we see in Scripture. We're not going to talk about all five of them today, but I want you to see them all so you can get a broad stroke.

The first we see is the covenant that we see with Noah, where God sets the rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant that God would never again destroy the earth by flood. Then there's the covenant with Abram, and that says he would have as many descendants as the stars

in the sky and in the sand of the sea, and his name will be a blessing, and he'll have the land of Canaan. And by him, all the families, all the nations of the world will be blessed.

The third covenant is the one we see with Moses, and it's signified by the Law. With Abraham, it was a covenant with a family, but with Moses, it's a covenant with a nation or a people, the people of Israel. They are to live by these laws, and these laws are going to define their loyalty, their faithfulness, their obedience to God.

The fourth covenant we see is the covenant with King David, and now we have a covenant with a nation. God says to David, "Your kingdom will go on in perpetuity." We're going to talk a little bit more about that in just a minute.

The fifth covenant we have is the new covenant that we have through Jesus, and we'll talk about that next week and in the weeks to come.

Three things as we look at these covenants that I want us to learn about covenants. These three things are the *purpose* of covenant, the *persistence* of covenant, and the *promise* of covenant. Let's first talk about the purpose of covenant.

The picture that we get in each one of these covenants is that God takes a smaller group of people with the purpose to use them for all the people. God takes Noah and his family with the purpose of using them to re-create the world. God takes that family of Abram, this single-family, with the purpose that by them, every family in the world will be blessed. You see, it's a smaller group with the purpose of doing something for everyone.

God looks to Israel and says, "You're going to show the world that I'm God. You're to show them my character, my goodness, my power."

Listen to the Scripture we read a few minutes ago, and I want you to see how many times the word *I* is used - that God is using the word *I*. "*I* appeared to Isaac as God Almighty, *I* established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan. *I* have heard the groaning of the Israelites and remembered that covenant. Say to the Israelites, *I* am the Lord, and *I* will free you. *I* will redeem you with an outstretched arm. *I* will take you as my people, and *I* will be your God."

Isn't that a relationship? *I* will be your God, and you will be my people. That's our covenant together. The purpose? So that everyone will know that "I'm the one who's doing this for you. So they'll see how you behave and how *I* save you that I'm a God who saves. I'm a God who loves. So that they will see in you just who *I* am."

Here's the truth - that those of us who are people of God, people who are in covenant with God, our behavior reflects on who God is. How the world sees who God is. We embody that. It could be negative, so when I talk to people who aren't Christians, they'll speak about Christians. They say, "I see hypocritical, narrow-minded people, judgmental people. I see people who are worried all about their image all the time."

And I say, "That's not the God I worship." They're implying that that's who we are, then they don't want to worship our God. I think of like maybe Emperor Charlemagne, who decided that he was going to make everybody a Christian. He said in the Dark Ages, "I'm going to establish Christendom in Europe with the sword. We're not going to convert you by love. We're going to force you or cut off your head!"

I think of Hitler, who used the name of Christ - a perverted cross of all things - to annihilate, to murder millions of people. "Is that the God we want to worship?" Our behavior reflects on who God is. On how the world sees who God is.

And the flip side. When I came to Christ, it was a group of young people whose spirit, whose behavior, whose way of life was so attractive to me. I said, "Wow, if this is the God you worship, I want some of that. If this is what it brings."

I think of a man who was a veteran of Vietnam who was disabled, who taught a Bible study I was in. He was so full of hope and life with a twinkle in his eye all the time. He was witnessing to us. And I thought, "I want some of that."

You see, the purpose of covenants is for us to reveal to the world the name of God. To glorify God, to edify others is the purpose of our covenant. Sometimes people will say, "What does it mean to glorify God?" Well, it means to make God shine. You may know the story of Ernest Gordon. He was a soldier, a POW in World War II who was caught in the Japanese POW camps. He went on the death march, "Through the Valley of the Kwai," is the book that he wrote. It became a movie titled "To End All Wars." If you haven't seen it, it's a great classic movie. He was not a believer in God; he said he was an agnostic or maybe an atheist. He was forced to go on this death march, and when it was over, he was barely alive, and they put him in sort of an infirmary. Two other captured soldiers, one named Dusty Miller, who had been a gardener in England somewhere. He was a Methodist. There was another man named Dinty Moore, who was a devout Roman Catholic, and they both took care of him. They would massage

his feet and bathe his wounds and put cold compresses on him to try and combat the fever. They would pray for him. And ultimately, he revived.

And as people saw the love and compassion of these two men, it was as if it was a little seed that then grew throughout the camp. So by Christmas in that year, there were some 200 people who gathered together to worship. The picture is of let's take a small relationship and allow that reflection to be a reflection of God. That then spreads throughout a larger group, and then throughout the whole world.

That is indeed the purpose of covenant. It's not *for us*; it's to be called into a special relationship for the purpose of others. The first "P" is the purpose of covenant.

Here's the second—the *persistence* of covenant. You see, God refuses to allow our sin, our separation, to be perpetuated. God refuses to give up on us.

In seminary, I took the Old Testament course from a marvelous professor named Bill Power. I'd say that of all the professors I had over the years, he's had the most influence on me. He used to tell the story of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and as he told it, it was like I thought, "I get it now. I never understood that before."

It's a picture of a God who continues to relent. The God who says, "If you eat of that tree on that day, you will surely die." Then they eat of the tree and what's the punishment? To the woman, he said, "You'll have in childbearing," and to the man, he said, "Thorns and thistles your work will produce."

It's like, "I can't bear to end you. I can't bear to finally give up on you." Cain kills his brother Abel and God says, "You're thrown out of the garden." And out there, someone's going to kill him, and Cain complains about that. So God relents and puts a mark on Cain, saying, "This mark will protect you." The mark of Cain is not a scarlet letter - it's a mark of protection.

God says, "I'm going to destroy the whole world by flood." Then he says, "Okay, I saw Noah, so let's start with Noah, and we'll rebuild the world." It's this God who continues, who just can't seem to give up on us.

Sometimes I hear people who draw the picture of an Old Testament God as a God of judgment and the New Testament God is a God of mercy and love. That misses the point. You see God's incredible love and mercy all the way through the story of Scripture. All the way through the story of "God and us." God just doesn't want to give up on us.

I started by talking about my marriage. I will tell you that as I said, there were times in our marriage that weren't so great. But we didn't quit. I wasn't a good husband. She didn't quit. We just continued to stay at it. I'm not saying that divorce is always the wrong thing; I don't believe that to be the case. Sometimes you can't rebuild it.

But I will tell you that it would be easier to quit. I asked a woman once when they were celebrating their 50th anniversary at a reception. I came up to her, and I said, "So tell me, what's the secret of staying married for 50 years?" She said, "I didn't divorce him." That was her answer, and it was straight forward and made sense. "I didn't divorce him."

Covenants - a marriage covenant - can be dissolved, and that's called divorce. But her picture was that she just stayed at it.

I spoke last year to the Houston Methodist Hospital awards banquet. It was for service awards, so if you'd been there five years or ten years or fifteen years or twenty years - a whole series of banquets and I just spoke at one of them. It was on behalf of the board to congratulate them. I said, "Congratulations, you didn't quit, you didn't get fired, and you didn't die! So that's what you've accomplished and why you're allowed to be here!" Part of it is just that. What God says to us is, "I am not going to give up. I am absolutely not going to give up on you."

When you read the Old Testament of God, what you see is this sort of what I call a yo-yo. You have a good king who leads the people of Israel in a way that they're faithful to God. Things go pretty well, but then you might have a bad king who allows the people of Israel to fall away and pursue other gods and oppress the poor. And all of those other things. Then you see that things don't go so well. Then a new king comes in, and there's a sense of a sort of recommitment, repentance. And that new king leads them in a way that they're faithful to God. Then they fall away again, and then they come back again. Then they fall away again, and then they come back again. Over and over, that's what you see in the Old Testament.

And as I read that, I think, "That's a lot like my relationship with God." That there are times as I'm living my life that I'm close to God, and I feel like I'm doing the right thing. I'm practicing my devotions and all of those things. Then there are other times when I look back and see that I've allowed myself to drift away. Or I'm just going through the motions.

I wonder if you feel that way sometimes. But here's the thing. While we might be riding up and down, God's stable and steady. Psalm 136 is one of my favorite Psalms. It is a responsive Psalm so that over and over in every single verse and there are 26 verses - it says, "God's

steadfast love endures forever...God's steadfast love endures forever..." The character of God is steadfastness, not giving up. It's persisting in this relationship.

Today's Father's Day, and I think about how when my kids were small. We had kids so young, and when they were small, I still as a father was operating out of this adolescent place in my brain. I found that my own way of parenting, my own anger would sometimes drive me. And I was almost as volatile as they were. The kids would go up and down, and they'd be happy, then they'd be screaming. Then I'd find myself doing the same. But as I grew, I realized that part of my job as a father, as a parent, is to demonstrate God's, steadfast love. The steadfastness. To not give up, to just continue to show.

Here's the third thing. We talked about God's purpose, we talked about God's persistence in covenant, and now I want to talk about God's promise. I mentioned earlier the covenant with David, and that covenant said to him, "Your descendants will rule in perpetuity. And that one day out of your family line will come the Messiah who will lead us into this time of righteousness and peace."

Listen to some of the Scripture - it just runs all through the Old Testament. This is from Isaiah 11: "A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse." Jesse is David's father, so this is written after David's life, so it's not about David, but it's about the one who is to come. "A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots and the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him. The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."

Over and over, we hear this promise lifted up in various words. In Micah, it says, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks and nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and no one shall make them afraid."

Or the passage in Isaiah 65 where it says, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people, and no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it. Or the cry of distress. The wolf and the lamb will feed together; the lion eat straw like an ox. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

You see the picture of this Messianic age that is to come. You know we look around right now, actually not just now but all the time, and we can find reasons to be discouraged. We have the Coronavirus, where hundreds of thousands of people have died around the world. We have wars around the world and challenges in our economy and incredible polarization. We have issues around racism that have gone on for hundreds of years. We have reason, for being discouraged, but why is it that we are a people of hope. It's because of this relationship we've been given is a relationship of promise. Because we hold fast to that God who holds fast to us and who tells us that this kingdom is already being established in Jesus Christ and is growing up around us and we shouldn't lose heart.

Let me close with this. An elderly couple are riding in their truck. They've been married 60 years, and the woman says to the man, "You remember how when we were teenagers together you were so romantic. I'd snuggle up next to you as we were driving on the bench seat, and we'd be right up close together everywhere we drove? You remember that?" He said, "Yes, I remember that." She said, "What happened?" He said, "I wasn't the one who moved."

I suspect that's what God would say to us. God's not the one who moved. God hasn't given up on us. We may have moved away, but God hasn't given up on us.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, you created us to be in relationship with you. And you pursue us with steadfast love in every way to live in this covenant relationship full of purpose and promise. Don't give up on us, God. Use us to share your name and character with the whole world. Amen.*