

Lesson 51: Chapter 7: Overview of the Covenants: Part Three: The Abrahamic Covenant

OUTLINE

Law
Land
Circumcision

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 3:15 is the promise of salvation, that begins the covenant of grace and the rest of the Bible until the end of Revelation 22 is merely showing how this single promise is fulfilled by God through the Person and Work of Christ. We have demonstrated how the Noahic Covenant is a covenant with all of Creation to keep the world stable and ticking along until the end when Jesus will come again. The story line of the Bible does not follow the rise and fall of the most powerful empires, the most innovative in the areas of technology and who contributed the most to the intellectual inheritance of humanity, the story of the Bible follows the story of a descendant of Noah through whom the promise of Gen. 3:15 will be fulfilled. Paragraph 3 of chapter 7 says, 'This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament.' Abraham is an important step along the path to the fulfillment in the New Testament.

Many people get the Abrahamic covenant wrong and as a result make a major misstep which has a knock on effect on the rest of their perspective on the Bible: Dispensationalists look at the promises of land, blessing and offspring in Gen. 12:1-3 as immutable and therefore seek geo-political return of ethnic Israel in the Millennium, insisting on two peoples of God; and instead of having a hermeneutic that interprets the OT in light of the greater light and inspired commentary of the NT, they bulldoze through later revelation through a commitment to a particular definition of 'literal' interpretation.

Paedobaptists, that is those who baptize babies come to the Abrahamic covenant and because God's covenant community includes the offspring of Abraham, they think that allows them to ignore the developments of the New Covenant and see the way the Abrahamic covenant is administered as normative. Because blood related kin to Abraham were sealed into a visible community associated with the promised Seed, this translates into believers, and only one generation of their offspring being included in the visible covenant community of the church. We will argue that the family principle where a man and his offspring are included in the covenant is a typological administration of the covenant of grace and not normative.

1689 Federalists a new brand of Reformed Baptists who we have a lot in common with, they deny that the Abrahamic Covenant is part of the CoG, and the New Covenant not Gen. 3:15 is when the CoG begins. Although they recognize that the substance of the covenant is present, that sinners are saved by grace through faith in Christ, they rearrange the administration of the covenants to resemble something closer to Dispensationalism.

A more insidious and problematic error is monocovenantalism where instead of distinguishing the Abrahamic Covenant from the Mosaic Covenant as Paul does in Galatians 3:17-19, they read the strong legal character of the Mosaic Covenant into all the various administrations of the CoG, including the

Abrahamic Covenant and as a result breed something akin to covenantal nomism. That we get saved by grace but we keep ourselves in the CoG by faithfulness. The conditional language of the MC gets inserted into every other administration of the CoG.

There is a lot to get at as we cover the Abrahamic Covenant but I want to zero in on three things, the AC in relation to the law of the MC; the promise of land in the AC; and the sign of circumcision.

The law

The life of Abraham begins in Gen. 11:26 where he is mentioned as a descendent of Shem, Noah's son. We are told that Terah settled in Canaan with his family, 11:31-32. Gen. 12-25 focuses on God's dealings with Abraham, from his call to go to the promised land until his death. There are four key events which make up the covenant with Abraham. Firstly, in Gen. 12:1-3 God promises Abraham land, offspring and blessing. Secondly, this promise is ratified in the covenant cutting ceremony of 15. Then after the promise of God making a covenant with Abraham's offspring 17:4-8, God gives the sign of circumcision as a sign of this covenant v11. Then finally in Gen. 22:1-19 Abraham's faith is tested when God calls Abraham to sacrifice his son.

One of the key lenses we use when reading the various covenants is the lens of law and promise. This is not an arbitrary distinction imposed on the bible, but rather we are learning to read the bible with Paul as he helps us see this distinction in Gal. 3:17-18, 'This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.' We can clearly see that Paul is contrasting the MC which he associates with law; and the promise given to Abraham. We saw in the CoW with Adam that the 'do this and you shall live; or do this and you shall die' language relates to a works principle/law principle. This is a bilateral covenant which is conditional on the actions of both parties. The MC we will see although an administration of the CoG and not the CoW has a strong legal aspect where for physical blessing there is a law principle/works principle added. So much so that Paul is able to contrast the AC as a promissory covenant to the MC as a law covenant.

The promissory nature of the AC is seen in the way the covenant with Abraham is ratified in Gen. 15. You will remember that God appears to Abraham repeating some elements of the original promise of Gen 12:1-3, v1. Abram questions God and how this will be possible because he has no physical heir, v2-3. God assures him that not merely a legal heir but a bloodborn son will be born and receive God's promise, v4-5. In V7 God makes a promise to give Abraham the land of Canaan. When Abram asks how he can know this will come to pass, v8. It is then that God cuts a covenant with Abraham, He makes what we call a self-maledictory oath. V9-11, 'He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.' Here is how one scholar illuminates what we are seeing here: 'Knowledge of ancient covenant treaties elucidates the purpose of the animal sacrifices. Covenant participants would create sometimes vivid illustrations of the fate that would befall any participant who broke the terms of the covenant. In some cases, effigies of the covenant

participants would be burned or melted during a ceremony, while in others, animals would be slaughtered, their viscera scattered on the ground, making a grisly path that the participants would walk down together as the terms of the covenant were read aloud.¹ In the ordinary case of events you would have both parties going through the pieces so that both parties would call down punishments upon themselves if either side broke the covenant. But God puts Abraham to sleep and goes through the pieces alone symbolizing that He has promised and He will fulfill the promise, Abraham is a passive recipient not a contributor, v12-21, 'As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites." We know the significance of this as it works itself out in the gospel. God promises to stand in the stead of the covenant breaker and to take his punishment. God takes the punishment for our sins upon Himself, and we become beneficiaries that receive the benefits of the promise by grace through faith and not by works.

So far we are in familiar territory, God's grace establishes the covenant and fulfils paying the penalties for our breach. It is not conditional upon us. This is why two anomalies have to be highlighted. Firstly, the conditionality added with the addition of circumcision; and Abraham's obedience securing the covenant after the testing of his faith. In Gen. 17:9-14, v14, 'Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.' As a result of this the 1689 Federalists group the AC with the MC and say it cannot be the covenant of grace. But we need not deny the essential promissory nature of the AC but by virtue of the progressive nature of the covenants as they move from a man and his family to include a nation, there is a continuity between the AC and the MC as God prepares a nation from his family. Gen. 22:17-18 likewise present another difficulty, 'I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.' 'Because you have obeyed my voice.' We must not by the inclusion of this obedience suddenly think that all gracious covenants are somehow conditional upon works, this is the mistake of the monocovenantalist. Rather we must recognize that there is a typological function when we see the obedience of Noah; Abraham; David, etc. securing the benefits of God's grace. We must remember that the CoG is a CoW fulfilled and this Saviour-type is pointing us forward to Christ's obedience that will secure our salvation by His obedience.

¹ Guy Prentiss Waters. "Covenant Theology." Crossway, 2020-10-27. Apple Books.

So all of this to say that the Abrahamic Covenant is essentially a gracious and promissory covenant with some typological and progressive stuff on top.

This becomes important when you try and understand the prophets later on. Because the MC is a law administered administration of the CoG, when Israel sins it will be exiled, but God will remember the promise that He made with Abraham and restore them to the land. This failure of the MC points forward for the need of a new covenant different to the MC by which we will become children of Abraham.

Land

Abraham was promised the land of Canaan. What is often not realized is that the promises to Abraham are a fulfillment of the promise of Gen. 3:15, it is one step of development to the fulfillment of the promise of Gen. 3:15. Christ not Israel is the goal of the Abrahamic Covenant because Christ not Israel is the goal of Gen. 3:15. There are several lines of thought that are leading the reader to root the promise to Abraham as a development of the promise of Gen. 3:15, something intended for the whole earth and not just Israel. The Genealogies of Gen. 5 takes us from Adam to Shem, and Gen. 11 from Shem to Abraham back to the promise of Gen. 3:15. In fact we see the seed of the serpent in the Canaanite tribes mentioned in the covenant promises of land in Gen. 15:19-21. The land of Israel, also called the inheritance is a typological land pointing forward to the New Creation Christ will secure for us, it is not an end in itself. Paul under inspiration teaches us to see this when he writes in Romans 4:13, 'For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.' Paul deliberately says that Abraham would inherit the world not merely the land. Jesus expands the typological realm of this promise as well. Matt. 5:5, "'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'

The promises of land; blessing and offspring are realized in Christ. Israel was a type anticipating something that would be bigger that included both Jews and Gentiles. That is why Paul says that all believers are children of Abraham and through our salvation in Christ we have inherited the promises, Gal. 3:7-8, 'Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." We do not believe in what is called a supersessionism or replacement theology where the church replaces Israel, rather we see elect Jews along with elect Gentiles saved into one new man, the body of Christ. We do not believe in one head with 2 bodies, but that the NT people of God are a royal priesthood and a holy nation; the Israel of God.

Circumcision

Let us also say a few words about baptism and its relationship with circumcision. Our paedobaptist brothers and sisters in Christ see a strong continuity between the application of an outward sign of righteousness that was applied to Abraham and his seed; and applying baptism to the believer and his/her children. Based on Rom. 4:11, 'He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the

righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.' They argue that if a sign that meant something related to salvation was applied to infants who did not have that salvation could be practiced in the OT, is God less gracious to apply baptism a sign of salvation to those who do not have it in the NT?

Our paedobaptist brethren agree with us that there are aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that are developed and replaced. For example, they see circumcision, a rite that can be applied only to males to be replaced with a sign that seals both males and females. It is our argument that there is more about the Abrahamic administration of the covenant of grace that is typological and not normative including the subjects of the sign.

Paedobaptists often argue that Abraham and his offspring is a normative pattern that runs along family lines indicating how God's grace is often family shaped, at least as it pertains to the external aspects of the covenant. Our argument is that the family shaped way of God's activity is typological and points to Christ's work.

If we begin with Adam in the covenant of works we can see that Adam plus his offspring would have been the beneficiaries of God's blessing if he had fulfilled the covenant of works. Adam failed therefore a Second Adam would be needed who would save His children by fulfilling the covenant of works. The rest of redemptive history is filled with types of this triumphant Adam who would succeed where the first had failed. The principle of representation would be typed through the family, but not only so also through the developing patriarchy as a family expands into a tribe, as well as to the monarchy as the tribes become a nation. All of these figureheads fail and point us to the One who is human, but not like us, who alone can save us.

A second example prior to Abraham is Noah, a man saved through judgement with his family who populates a new creation for God. We see a family principle active because it portrays Christ and those who are united to Him, but by a bond more significant than blood. No one copies and pastes God's way of saving Noah as normative clearly understanding that it is a type. If we tried to copy and paste it we would have to include adult children in the salvation of a parent, as being actually saved. Likewise as we come to the Abrahamic covenant where God gives a promise to him and his offspring we see once again another type of Christ and those bonded to Him as being the fulfilment of this pattern. For this reason when Christ comes we put away the pattern of a believer and his seed as typological and do not apply it as normative. The representative head and those bonded to him, namely Abraham and his household (including his servants), is a type pointing to Christ as the Second Adam who gains the blessing of God for those bonded to Him.

A difficulty arises for the paedobaptist who wants to make God's dealing with Abraham normative. They argue that a believer and their seed, by birth or adoption, would be included in the external covenant and therefore receive the sign. The trouble is that Abraham's household which included his spouse, servants, and even unbelievers were brought into the covenant. Also it was not limited to just one generation of believers and his children but to the 1000th generation. No paedobaptist applies baptism to their grandchildren in a type of half way covenant if the parents prove not to be believers. We account for the 'messiness' as typological, a broad principled application of federal

representation; but those who look to it for a normative pattern will trip up on these details.

The nature of the NC argues that there will no longer be a non-elect people sown in with the elect, but that each one will be regenerate. Likewise the NC promises the removal of the family link in promises like Jer. 31:29-30.

We view John's Baptism which made a physical connection to Abraham secondary; and his kingdom baptism of repentance as paradigmatic, for the baptisms of Jesus and His disciples during His incarnation, John 4:2; as well as the baptism of the early church, Acts 2:38-39, as preparing a move away from covenant inclusion by blood alone, John 1:12-13. A change in the doctrine of adoption as national and spiritual to purely spiritual reinforces this. The New Covenant and the promised nature of its blessings modelling New Creation realities likewise cement who the real subjects of the covenant sign should be. The absence of one command to baptise an infant; the absence of one example of an infant being baptised; the description of all those who were baptised as showing signs of a credible confession of faith, shore it up further.