



# Back to the Beginning

## Week 4: Covenants

Brian Mattson - 05/10/2026

Over the first three weeks of this series on Genesis, we've gone *Back to the Beginning*. We traveled back to the first account of creation itself in the creation poem of Genesis 1. Next came Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. That first bite of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge introduced sin and humanity's predilection for selfish ambition. Outside of the garden, people multiplied, but evil and wickedness proliferated as well. Eventually, Noah was called to protect and restore God's image in an ark to repopulate the earth after the flood.

In these stories—what are referred to as Israel's primeval history—we get a glimpse at how the ancient Hebrew people understood creation, sin, wickedness, and natural disasters. Genesis 1-11 focuses on the chaos-taming, creation spawning, image-making, promise-keeping, earth-renewing, order-restoring power of the Hebrew God, Yahweh, though we haven't actually found out God's name yet. These first eleven chapters contain origin stories that explain how the God of the ancient Hebrew people was different from the gods of their neighbors. Genesis 12-50 shifts the focus to how the Hebrew *people* were different from their neighbors. And it comes from the line of the ancestor of all Israelites—Abraham. First, he's known as Abram and he enters into a covenant with God.

The word covenant isn't used much in the day-to-day world. It's much more common in the church world. We use the word to describe Baptism and membership. If you've served on the board of the church, you've signed a covenant as we work to complete the business and goals of the church together. Maybe you are only familiar with your homeowner's association covenants, though you still haven't actually read them. Covenant seems like a formal word. Even a daunting word. If you were put on the spot to come up with a definition, could you cobble something together? Perhaps the easiest example for the most people to understand is at a wedding. In this ceremony, the couple enters into a covenant, which involves promises and responsibilities of both people, and is expressed by a distinguishing sign.

The vows we say at weddings are the promises and responsibilities, and the rings we exchange are an outward, distinguishing sign. Do you remember your wedding vows? Did you write your own? Jessica and I opted for the traditional vows that have been shared by couples across generations found in the hymnal.

**In the name of God, I, *man*, take you, *woman*, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.**

We liked the idea of saying the same words that so many other people before us had spoken. Stepping into a generational practice, sharing the tradition with other family members and friends, was a special experience. We were saying these well-worn and carefully chosen words, used by so many before us, but at that moment they were brand new because it was the first time *we* were saying them to each other. Of course, I must admit that the thing I was most worried about was repeating the correct words. There's a lot going through your head at this point in the ceremony. The bright lights seemed to have become the actual sun at that moment and the words leaving the pastor's mouth sounded like they were a mile away. *What was that*

*again?* I found myself thinking. *Do I say my name now or her name?* We made it through without any flubs, thankfully.

My sister, Lauren, and her husband, Jorge, wrote their own vows. It can always be a little scary to hear your future spouse say something to you that you've never heard before, in front of a crowd, no less. They both wrote wonderful vows. My sister went first and the words were beautiful and meaningful. Jorge followed and to say we were all speechless is an understatement. He slowly read his vows, his promises, to my sister and the care and tenderness of the words was absolutely beautiful. I kid you not, when he finished his vows there was not a dry eye in the room. Shakespeare himself couldn't have penned better sentences. It was the first and only time I've ever seen spontaneous applause erupt after the reading of vows. That's how beautiful the words were.

But in both of those instances of exchanged vows—borrowed words and original ones—it's not simply the words themselves that make it so meaningful and powerful. It's the intentions behind the words. Covenants of all kinds indicate this binding promise; a relationship built on vows and commitments. Covenants are meaningful and special, and the one God enters into with Abraham charts the course and shapes the identity of a future people.

We get to Abraham's story when he's still called Abram. This is a major shift in the Genesis story. At this point, the world is corrupt and in chaos. The people are spread out across the land with no shared language. They've become rebellious and intent on doing things their own way. So God decides to change strategies and focus on a smaller group of people to accomplish God's objectives. Abraham comes on the scene and things immediately move quickly. There's no buildup. God says, "Go!" and Abraham moves.

**Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I**

**will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”**

**- Genesis 12:1-3**

In these three pivotal verses, God charts the future for Abraham’s ancestors through these three promises. God promises to provide Abraham with:

- 1. Land**
- 2. Descendants**
- 3. Blessings**

These are the guides for Abraham and the future Israelites. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, though certain people were highlighted, the perspective was global. The work of creation and redemption was for everyone. That didn’t change here with Abraham. It’s just that Abraham’s descendants would be the vehicle to deliver God’s blessings to all people. The common phrase used about Abraham is that his line was “blessed to be a blessing.”

Over the next few chapters, there are some interesting stories about Abraham—a journey to Egypt, a baby with his wife’s servant—that show the complex and imperfect character presented in Genesis. Scholars Pete Enns and Jared Byas say:

**These episodes highlight how Abraham’s story mirrors Israel’s. For one thing, even though Abraham is called by God, his behavior in these episodes leaves something to be desired, which mimics Israel’s struggles with God in a nutshell.**

**- Pete Enns and Jared Byas**

You’ll remember—these stories in Genesis were edited and captured in writing by people generations after these stories occurred. Some of these details and character tendencies, good and bad, must have been comforting to the audiences who finally read the words. Almost as if to say, *yes,*

*punishments, and wanderings, and bad decisions have happened, but they are not the end of our story. We've been here before and God will be faithful even now.*

After a few more interesting twists and turns in Abraham's story, the relationship between him and God changes. This is when the covenant between the two is established through a formal process. It starts with God reminding Abraham of earlier promises, but Abraham, like all of us, wonders if they will ever come true. He still doesn't have a child! God assures him it will be so.

**God brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.**

**- Genesis 15:5-6**

These verses show two things. First, that God is talking about more than just heirs, for no one could have countless children, so this must be a metaphor. And second, that Abraham has great faith. Both of these are descriptors of what the future nation of Israel should look like. Then God reminds Abraham of the land that was promised, and again, Abraham wonders about that promise too. He wants some assurances. So God enacts this covenant with Abraham:

**God 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." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other, but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.**

**As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the LORD**

**said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."**

**When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."**

**- Genesis 15:9-21**

Alright, take a breath. That was kind of weird, right? Our modern brains are thinking, *See? This is why I don't read the Bible. What am I to make of all that?* And I must admit, it does seem weird. It *is* weird to us today. But we are not ancient Israelites. To understand what is happening here, we have to understand a little more about the ancient culture in which this story was written. If I may summarize for a moment, this is the basic idea.

Abraham is looking for a little certainty from God about all these promises. Therefore God enters into a binding covenant with Abraham where sacrificial animals are cut in half, lengthwise, and divided by a path. In a dream, God shows Abraham his future descendants in bondage and oppression in a foreign land. Eventually, his people will leave and become a wealthy nation. To bind God to these promises, a fire pot and flaming torch, representing God, passes between the animals. What this implies is that God is saying, "If I

don't fulfill my part of this covenant, may I become like these animals, split in two."

I know this is an odd way to sign a contract, but it was actually a common practice in some of these ancient cultures. This covenant is a direct reflection of other ancient compacts, wherein a more powerful king would make an oath with a less powerful subject, and there were stipulations on both sides. But this covenant with Abraham again shows how the God of Israel was different. It didn't require Abraham to show up and fight in battles. It required faith. It's basically God saying, "I am your God and this is what I will do for you. Trust me in return." This God is different from other deities in those ancient cultures, and therefore, those people were different from other nations. Later, there would be a visible sign adopted by Abraham and his descendants to indicate their connection to this covenant.

There are soooo many more interesting things about Abraham's story that we don't have time for today, but you may be wondering *what does this have to do with me?* At a basic level, I hope it helps you understand a few weird sentences in this ancient book. At a deeper level, I want to introduce the idea of covenant as an important aspect of our faith. This covenant with Abraham wasn't the first and it wasn't the last, but it is perhaps the one most identified with the beginnings of the Israelites. And throughout the ancient Israelites history, they both lived into, and failed miserably, in their pursuit of a covenant relationship with God. Which brings us to that Jesus fellow.

Jesus institutes a new covenant. An everlasting covenant. A covenant that is offered to all people of every nation, tribe, and tongue. Jesus succeeded where all other humans failed before. And that's because Jesus was no mere human. Rather, God became human to be that faithful covenant partner we were all made to be, but failed to be. Jesus is the culmination of God's covenantal promise. In the words of scholar, Whitney Woolard:

**In the new covenant, we receive the forgiveness of sins and God's empowering Spirit to help us live lives full of self-giving love. Because of**

**Jesus, we can live righteously and partner with him as he renews the world.**

**- Whitney Woolard**

John Wesley developed his own covenant model. He adapted a prayer to be used at a special covenant renewal service. We often talk about it around the New Year. At its essence is re-entering into a covenant relationship with Jesus. To be partners with him in living out his greatest commandment—to love God and love neighbors—in the world today.

We are going to read these words together. And remember, much like wedding vows, they aren't just words. There is meaning behind them. Saying them, in essence, requires something of you. Belief, intention, action. These are promises you are trying to uphold as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and his ancestors—to be people of faith. Will you read these words with me as we renew our covenant with Jesus, God's flesh on earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

**I am no longer my own, but yours.**

**Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.**

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

**Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,**

**Praised for you or criticized for you.**

**Let me be full, let me be empty.**

**Let me have all things, let me have nothing.**

**I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.**

**And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and**

**Sustainer, You are mine, and I am yours. So be it.**

**And the covenant which I have made on earth,**

**let it also be made in heaven.**

**Amen**