From Eden to Bethlehem: The Covenant Family Begins
Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 15:5, 7–21; 18:14; 21:1–8; 22:1–2, 7-8, 13-18; Joshua 21:43–45; Jeremiah 34:18–20; John 3:16; Hebrews 6:13–18

Last week, even though we were in the beginning, we established that there would need to be a Redeemer. However, the promise of a Redeemer raises a question: "How is that Redeemer going to come? Through whom?"

Before God sent a Savior, He started building a family. This week, that family begins with one man and one woman who are old, childless, and have every reason to believe the story ends with them.

What is a Covenant?:

A covenant is a formal, solemn, and binding agreement, promise, or compact between two or more parties.

Think about the last time you signed something at the bank. Maybe it was a mortgage or a car loan. You sat at a table, somebody slid a stack of papers across to you, and you signed your name. Then you initiated. Then you signed again. Page after page. You entered into an agreement or a covenant with that bank.

Why all the signatures? Because the bank doesn't know you, and even if they do, they don't know if you'll keep your word. So they make you put your name on it. Because a promise is only as good as the person standing behind it.

Now here's the question I want you to sit with this morning: What if you made a deal, and the other party signed for both of you saying, "If this falls apart, even if it falls apart because of you, I'll take the penalty myself"?

That sounds crazy. Nobody does business that way. But that is exactly what God did with Abraham and exactly what God does with you and me.

God's Promises to Abram:

When we meet Abram in Genesis 12, the world around him is not exactly chasing after God. But even then, there were still people who sought to follow Him. Abram and his family were some of those people and God speaks to him.

Read Genesis 12:1–3. Look at the three things God promises: I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, and through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Don't miss that last one. God never intended to bless Abram so he could keep it to himself. The nation that would come from Abram, Israel, was supposed to follow God and influence everyone it came in contact with. And here's where our series is headed: it is through Abram's family tree that Jesus Christ would be born to save humanity.

So Abram does something remarkable. He goes. He moves out in faith from Ur, to Haran, and finally into Canaan. He doesn't have a map. He has a promise.

Read Genesis 12:7. God says, "To your offspring I will give this land." And what does Abram do? He builds an altar. (Altars were common in a lot of religions back then. But for God's people, an altar was more than a place of sacrifice. It was a place of communion with God. It marked a moment where God met them. They were built out of rough stones and dirt, and they would stay there for years standing as a reminder of God's protection and God's promises.) For Abram, the land was promised but he was living in it as a stranger. So this Altar was important to remind him and his offspring of God's promises.

Then there's the bigger promise…the one that seems impossible. Read Genesis 15:5. God takes Abram outside at night and says, "Look up. Count the stars if you can. So shall your offspring be." Here's the problem. Abram doesn't have a single child yet. Not one. And he and Sarah are getting older every day.

Fast forward to Genesis 18. Three visitors show up at Abraham's tent, and one of them says, "About this time next year, Sarah will have a son." And Sarah, listening from inside the tent, laughs. Because she's well past the age of having children. Biologically, this is not happening. Then God asks one of the greatest questions in the whole Bible. Read Genesis 18:14. That's the question underneath this whole story. Abraham and Sarah can't manufacture this future. They can't plan it, can't earn it, can't force it. If this promise is going to happen, God is going to have to do it.

God's Commitment to His Promises:

So Abram has promises, but how does he know God means it? In Genesis 15, Abram asks God that very question: "How can I know?" God answers him in one of the strangest scenes in the whole Old Testament.

Read Genesis 15:7-21. God tells Abram to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abram cuts the animals in two and lays the halves across from each other, with a path running down the middle. While this sounds bizarre to us, to Abram, this was a contract or covenant.

Let's look at Jeremiah 34:18-20 for some information about what this means. Cutting an animal in two and walking between the halves was the customary way to ratify a contract back then and the meaning was not subtle. When you walked between those pieces, you were saying, "If I break this covenant, may what happened to these animals happen to me."

That's how serious a covenant was. In Jeremiah, God is telling His people, "You walked through the pieces. You made the deal. You broke it. And you know what judgment comes with that."

Back in Genesis 15, you'd expect both parties to walk between the pieces. Abram on one side and God on the other. But that's not what happens. Verse 12 says a deep sleep falls on Abram. He's not walking anywhere.

Then in verse 17, after the sun goes down, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces. That's God. The fire and the smoke point to His holiness, His zeal for what is right, and His judgment on the nations. And God walks that path *alone.*

God took the initiative, God gave the confirmation, and God would follow through. His passing between the pieces was a visible assurance to Abram that this covenant was real.

Abram never walked through. Only God did. Which means God was saying, "If this covenant is broken, by me *or by you*, I will take the penalty on myself."

Think back to that stack of loan papers. The bank makes you sign because they don't trust you to keep your word. Here, God signs for you, because He already knows you won't keep yours. Yet He makes the promise anyway.

This sets the stage for why Jesus had to die for us. Humanity broke the covenant and what was done to those animals (torn, broken, laid open) was done to Jesus as a result. God took the penalty on Himself, just like He said He would. This is how God would one day fulfill every one of His promises: through Jesus, the ultimate sign of God with us.

(One more detail. Verse 10 tells us Abram cut the animals in two but the birds were not divided. I see that as a picture of the Holy Spirit: unified, never divided.)

The writer of Hebrews picks up this exact moment in Abraham's story. Read Hebrews 6:13-18. When people make an oath, they swear by something greater than themselves. ("I swear on my mother's grave." or "I swear by the moon and the stars in the sky.") But when God made His promise to Abraham, there was nothing greater to swear by. So He swore by Himself.

God's promises are unchanging and trustworthy because God is unchanging and trustworthy. His oath was as good as His name and His name was as good as His nature.

Verse 18 says there are two unchangeable things, God's nature and God's promise, and it is impossible for God to lie. God is the truth. So you don't have to wonder whether He's going to change His plans halfway through. The God who promises is the God who swears by His own faithfulness.

God's Fulfillment:

Did God keep His word? Abram settled in Canaan in Genesis 13, however, he lived there as a foreigner. The land was promised but not possessed. Let's look ahead now to the book of Joshua.

Read Joshua 21:43-45. The Lord gave Israel all the land He had sworn to give their fathers. Not one word of all the good promises failed. All came to pass even though some of those promises took years, or even generations, to fulfill. God's promises will be fulfilled on His timetable, not ours. His word is truth. Here's the encouraging part. The more we learn about the promises God has already kept, the easier it is to hope for the ones still to come.

I know some of you are impatient this morning. You want God to act a certain way, and you want it now. I get it. But the call for us is to faithfully do what we know He wants us to do, and trust Him with the future.

The 'Impossible' Promise:

Read Genesis 21:1-8. "The Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had promised." As He had said. As He had promised. The text makes sure we hear it twice, and anything we hear more than once must be!!

Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. He was 75 when he left Haran back in chapter 12. That's 25 years of waiting on one promise. And Sarah, the same Sarah who laughed in disbelief in the tent, now says, "God has made laughter for me." The laugh of doubt became the laugh of joy.

Isn't that just like God? He takes the very thing that made us laugh because it seemed impossible, and He makes it the thing we laugh about because He did it.

So the promise has arrived. The son is here. The family has begun. And then God asks for him back…

The 'Sacrifice' of Isaac:

Read Genesis 22:1-2. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." This isn't just Abraham's son. This is *the* son. The one he waited 25 years for. The one every promise runs through. The stars in the sky, the great nation, the blessing to every family on earth…all of it runs through this boy. And God says, "Put him on the altar."

Why would God ask Abraham to do something like this? The pagan nations around them practiced human sacrifice but God makes it clear in Leviticus 20 that it is condemned as a terrible sin.

God did not want Isaac to die. Verse 1 tells us what was happening: God was testing Abraham. He wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac *in his heart,* so it would be clear that Abraham loved God more than he loved even the promised, long-awaited son.

The purpose of a test like that is not to break us. It's to strengthen our character and deepen our commitment to God and His timing. Through this, Abraham strengthened his commitment to obey. And he learned something about God's ability to provide.

Now back to the story. Abraham gets up early and takes with him Isaac, the wood, and the fire for a three day walk to the place God shows him. Somewhere on that mountain, Isaac asks the awkward question: "*My father... Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?*" (Read Genesis 22:7-8)

Abraham answers: "*God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.*" They build the altar. Abraham lays the wood. He binds his son. He raises the knife. Then the angel of the Lord calls out: "*Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy!*"

Read Genesis 22:13-14. Abraham looks up, and there's a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. He offers the ram *instead of* his son. And he names that place "*The Lord Will Provide*." Here's the nuance I want you to catch. The promised future was never secured by Abraham's ability to hold on to it. It was secured by God. God provided what was needed for the story to continue.

The Parallel:

This is where Genesis 22 starts pointing us toward Bethlehem, and beyond that, to the cross. Look at the parallel. A father. A beloved, only son. Wood carried up a hill. A substitute offered in the son's place. The ram on that altar was a substitute for Isaac. Christ on the cross was a substitute for us.

Yet there's a difference. God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son. God did *not* spare His own Son. If Jesus had lived, the rest of humankind would have died. So God sent His only Son to die for us, so that we can be spared the eternal death we deserve and receive eternal life instead.

Read John 3:16. On Mount Moriah, God provided a ram. At Calvary, God provided the Lamb.

Read Genesis 22:15-18. Genesis 22 doesn't end with Abraham's faith. It ends with God reaffirming His oath. "*By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord.*" There it is again, God swearing by Himself, just like Hebrews told us.

Look at what God promises. Abraham's offspring will possess the gate of their enemies. And in his offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Abraham received abundant blessing because he did not hold back. Notice where that blessing goes. It's not just for Abraham to enjoy. It's meant to overflow to the whole earth. People's lives would be changed because of the faith of Abraham and his descendants.

Most of the time we think of blessings as gifts to be enjoyed. But when God blesses us, His blessings are meant to overflow to others.

The Promise Is Anchored:

What happens when the very thing God promised seems to be taken away? Here's what Abraham's story tells us. The promise was never resting on Abraham's ability to control it. He couldn't produce a son at 100. He couldn't protect that son on Mount Moriah. Every single time, the future depended on God, and every single time, God provided.

Some of you are standing on your own Mount Moriah this morning. Something you believed God promised you feels like it's slipping through your fingers. A marriage. A child. A calling. A dream you've carried for years.

I can't tell you how your story will play out. But I can tell you who is holding it. The God who walked between the pieces alone. The God who swore by Himself. The God who provided a ram on that mountain and the Lamb on the cross.

Remember those loan papers? Every signature on that stack was there because the bank wasn't sure about you. God already knows everything about you, every way you've failed and every way you will. And he signed anyway. He signed for both sides. Then He sent Jesus to pay the penalty you couldn't. **When God makes a promise, He signs for both sides.**

Hebrews 6 goes on in verse 19 to say we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. An anchor doesn't keep a ship from feeling the waves, but it holds the ship in place while the waves come. It grabs hold of the seabed and doesn't let go. That's what our hope in God does. It's secure and immovable because it's anchored in Him, not in us.

So why covenants? Why a contract at all? It's because that is what humanity can understand. You do this for me and I will do that for you. As humans we tend to make our relationships contractual. So God in his wisdom made his relationship contractual too. Not because He wanted to, but because we understand contracts and the "Terms of Conditions."

Do you know what you call a contract where one person signs both sides of the contract and takes full responsibility for the outcomes? A relationship. That is all God has ever wanted.

That same promise is open to you. To anyone who truly seeks Him and comes to Him in belief, God gives an unconditional promise of acceptance. If you come to God with openness, honesty, and sincerity, and ask Him to save you from your sins, He will do it. That's not a maybe. That's a promise from the God who cannot lie.

For those of you who already know Him: walk out of here with encouragement, with assurance, and with confidence. The God who kept His promise to Abraham is keeping His promises to you.

Reflection Questions:

- Abraham waited 25 years for God's promise of a son to be fulfilled. Have you ever struggled to trust God's timing? What makes waiting on God difficult, and what can Abraham's story teach us about patience and faith?
- In Genesis 15, God alone passed between the divided animals, taking responsibility for the covenant. What does this reveal about God's character and His commitment to His promises? How does knowing God is faithful even when we are not change the way you approach Him?
- When Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac, he trusted that God would provide. What are some things you find difficult to surrender to God? How can you learn to trust His provision even when you cannot see the outcome?
- God provided a ram in Isaac's place, pointing ahead to Jesus, the Lamb who would be sacrificed for us. How does understanding Jesus as our substitute deepen your appreciation for what God has done for you?