



## Post Tenebras Lux Covenant Theology...

### Abraham and the Stars...

### Genesis 17:1-27

Now, we have been talking the last few weeks about the issue of covenant theology. In particular, I have been trying to point out that the roots of covenant theology are found in the Old Testament. That doesn't mean that covenant theology is only taught in the Old Testament, anymore than say the doctrine of atonement. But it does mean that to rightly understand covenant theology one must begin their search in the shadows and types of the Old Testament.

And while of that is true, it is particularly true of the story of the Abraham. His relationship to the promises of God and the redemptive plan of God become increasingly apparent as one reads the letters of Paul as well as the other letters of the New Testament. So, that is where we began.

What we noticed in God's gracious dealing with Abraham is that God was the initiator. He sovereignly called Abraham of Ur of the Chaldees and promised him a blessing. God's revelation did not come all at once, In fact, from a man's point of view, it came slowly, exceedingly slow, almost agonizingly so. Not only did it come slowly; it also came in parts.

There was the initial revelation of God in Ur of the Chaldees.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Genesis 12:1...The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."**

What a wonderful promise that was.

Then 11 years later, God added His promise to fulfill the covenant in a rite of blood covenant. You will remember that God came and walked through the divided pieces of severed animal parts to confirm to Abraham that the covenant would indeed be fulfilled. But not only did God pledge Himself in a solemn oath, He also gave further revelation to Abraham.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Genesis 15:13...Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." <sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—**

Now God no longer promised to show Abraham a land in which he might dwell, but He promised to give Abraham and his descendants a land that they might possess. He also revealed to Abraham that his descendants would be slaves for 400 hundred years but that afterward they would come out with great spoil and

terrifying judgment and that they would bring the wealth of Egypt out with them when they came.

Still twelve years later, there was more.

God came back to Abraham when Abraham was ninety-nine years old. He changed both Abraham's and Sarah's names. He promised to fulfill the promise based upon His own character and strength. You will remember that He revealed Himself to Abraham as God Almighty, El Shaddai. Yet this time God laid covenantal responsibilities upon Abraham. He also gave Abraham the sign of the covenant.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Genesis 17:9...Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner-- those who are not your offspring. <sup>13</sup> Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."**

Now the covenant sign was a sign of initiation for all those that lived in Abraham's household. It was sign of entrance. It is true that the covenant had been made with Abraham earlier, but those that lived under Abraham's charge were now being included. They were being included regardless of age or station. Young and old, bond and free, were all being included with, under and through Abraham. Now, it is true that the sign was gender related. Only the males were

circumcised but every female shared the sign whenever they were intimate with their husbands or whenever they bore children.

Then we considered what the sign meant. In its most immediate sense, the sign recalled the covenant that God, Himself, had made with Abraham. It recalled the solemn blood oath God had cut with Abraham back in Genesis 15. But it also said more. It demonstrated the separation of Abraham's seed from the nations around it. It demonstrated the rolling away of sin and defilement, although that would not become as clear until later on. Certainly, it revealed the importance walking before God because of the solemn curse God had added.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 17:14**...Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

God was saying that Abraham's seed would break the covenant if they failed to employ the covenantal sign. In fact, God was saying that the sign and the covenant were the same thing.

All of that leads me to consider. Did covenants, especially covenants made by God, always have an accompanying sign? To find that answer, I would like for us to look at an old familiar passage. Turn to Genesis 8:20 and following.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 8:20**...Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. <sup>21</sup> The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "**Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.** <sup>22</sup> "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."

Now, the thing that is clear in that passage is that God's wrath was assuaged by the sacrifice made by Noah. I think it would be fair to say that God's wrath was propitiated or turned aside by the combination of judgment and of sacrifice.

What is exceedingly clear, is that God pronounced blessing upon Noah and his descendants.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Genesis 9:1...Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup> The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. <sup>3</sup> Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.**

However, God did put some obligations upon Noah and his seed. Look at verse 4.

**Genesis 9:4..."But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. <sup>5</sup> And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. <sup>6</sup> "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. <sup>7</sup> As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."**

The one constraint that God put on mankind was that they were to be careful about blood. Even that had two components. They were not to eat the blood of animals they killed and they were not to shed the blood of other humans. Both of those actions made up the covenantal obligation that mankind possessed before God.

Of course, they were to also take care regarding the kinds of animals they ate. The apparent promise from God that they could any and all animals must be balanced against the command God gave concerning some animals being clean and some animals being unclean even while they were filling the ark. It is reminiscent command God gave Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when he told them:

**NIV Genesis 2:16...And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."**

But what was the sign of the covenant. God reveals that in Genesis 9:8.

**NIV Genesis 9:8...Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you-- the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you-- every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." <sup>12</sup> And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup> I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. <sup>16</sup> Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." <sup>17</sup> So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."**

The sign of the covenant given to Noah and his seed was God's bow in the clouds. Now our tendency is to read the word rainbow instead of the word bow.

But when we do that we miss the point of the passage. Indeed, it was a rainbow that God was pointing to, but God was saying he was hanging up His bow, as in bow and arrow, in the clouds. The underlying Hebrew word is the word bow, as in bow and arrow. The fact that we retain the word bow in the English word rainbow is a testimony to the fact that God was saying He was hanging up His bow. It was a sign of God's intention for peace. It was a sign that God was no longer going to hunt down mankind in mass judgment like a hunter. His bow was being hung over the mantle of heaven, in the horizontal position of peace, much like we as Texans would later come to understand the phrase about retired gunfighters, as in **"He is hanging up his guns."**

All of that has led to many to consider the relationship between God's covenant with Noah and God's covenant with Abraham, indeed even God's later covenants with Moses and David. And we will discuss that later on. But for now, I am just trying to show that whenever God makes a covenant, He imposes obligations and gives a covenantal sign or a sign of initiation.

With Abraham, the sign was circumcision. With Noah the sign was God's bow in the clouds. Both had visible signs that God had made a covenant with them, that is, they had signs of initiation. Both had clear obligations placed upon them.

That was even true of Adam and Eve. God also made a covenant with them. Now it should be obvious even though it has been debated at length over the centuries. Theologians have routinely called this covenant the Covenant of Works. Listen to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (WCF 6:1-2)

In the Shorter Catechism, it reads.

**Q. 12. What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?**

**A.** When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Now, I want you to think for a moment about this covenant of works. It had a promise. The promise was that Adam and Eve would live both physically and spiritually before God. But the covenant also carried obligations. What were those obligations? The first obligation they had was to cultivate the garden. That is why God put them there. Secondly, they were to abstain from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

So, I think you can see that God made a covenant with Adam. There was a promise and there were obligations. The question then is "What was the sign of the covenant?" What that sign was has been somewhat debated. Some say it was the Tree of Life. Which makes perfect sense, especially in light of the fact that they were kept from the sign after they were cast out of the Garden. Others say it was the fruit of all the trees that they were allowed to eat. I would have to say, "I am not completely sure."

What I am sure of is that failure to keep the covenant meant death. When they failed to keep the covenant with God they were doomed and they were cast out of the garden. Of course, God then went on to make another covenant with them and that covenant is something we call the covenant of grace. We find it Genesis 3:15. There, God makes a promise to Adam and Eve.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 3:15**...And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

His promise to them is for a seed that will bruise the head of Satan. Theologians call this promise the proto-gospel. It is the promise of the gospel yet to come. It is a promise that would ultimately find its fulfillment in Christ. Indeed, all of the covenants that we have looked at this morning find their fulfillment in the gospel.

<sup>NIV</sup> **2 Corinthians 1:20**...For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. <sup>21</sup> Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Up to this point, I have been somewhat reluctant to state where I am going in this study. But this morning in the few minutes I have remaining, I would like to tell you outright. Christ is the fulfillment of all the promises made by God in the various covenants made with men.

He is the promised seed through which the head of Satan would be crushed. He is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise God made to Noah in that it was

through Christ that God has finally been propitiated. Indeed, God has hung up His bow eternally with regard to all those that are in Christ.

Concerning the promises made to Abraham, it was Christ who was cut off for our disobedience. He was made a shame and a reproach that we might be viewed as righteous before God. In Christ, all the promises made to Abraham have been fulfilled. That seems to me to be the point Paul is making in Galatians.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Galatians 3:6**...Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." <sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."

Now this morning, I have spent a good deal of time talking about the sign of the covenant. I have talked about circumcision, God's bow in the clouds, and even the tree of life. What I meant to do in each case is to talk about signs of initiation. That is, I meant to talk about those signs, which indicate that there was a covenant with God in the first place.

What we have not talked about at all so far is that there also appears to be a sign of covenant renewal. Let me explain what I mean. When couples get married, they possess a sign of initiation of their covenant together. It is a wedding ring. It is the sign to both of them that they have entered into a covenant. But it is hardly ever enough.

Both people want further affirmation of the covenant between them. Sometimes it finds fulfillment in intimate conversation, or even physical intimacy. Those acts shout out that **“Yes, I have indeed entered into a covenant with you and we are communing together intimately to confirm the covenant.”**

Of course, the act of covenant renewal is more formally demonstrated every year in the form of anniversaries. What woman is there among us that does not want the anniversary of the promises made by their husband to be reconfirmed on their anniversary? What husband is that that is not happy to accommodate the wife of his youth by reconfirming the promises that he made? What woman is there that is not decimated by her husband’s failure to remember his solemn promise to have and to hold from this day forth.

It is a time of intimacy and reflection and recommitment on the part of both people.

What is interesting is that the notion of covenant renewal also occurred between God and Abraham. While God’s communication with Abraham had been infrequent, when God confirmed His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, God came back to reconfirm His promise with Abraham in Genesis 18. Let’s look at it together.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Genesis 18:1**...The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He

said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way-- now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." <sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." <sup>7</sup> Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. <sup>9</sup> "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. <sup>10</sup> Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." <sup>15</sup> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." <sup>16</sup> When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. <sup>17</sup> Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? <sup>18</sup> Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous <sup>21</sup> that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." <sup>22</sup> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

Now, what is interesting is that God promised to visit again the next year in the birth of Isaac. I don't want to spend too much time on this right now because I will discuss it later at length. But I do want you to notice one thing in particular; the relationship between God and Abraham is completely different. It is not a

relationship of distance. It is a relationship of intimacy. They dine together like friends. I will expand the idea further later on.

To sum up what we have seen together. Covenants have signs and there are two aspects to any those signs. First, there is the sign of initiation and secondly there is the notion of covenant renewal.

Let's pray.