



Post Tenebras Lux Covenant Theology...

Introduction...

Genesis 15:1-21

He was restless.

He was an old man, somewhere around eighty five or eight six years old and sleep was evading him. But he was used to that. He was eighty-five years old and he was a long way from home.

There was really nothing remarkable about him. He traveled with a large band of men, women and children and even larger band of sheep and goats. But four thousand years ago, most people with livestock were nomadic, ever moving, ever searching for grazing land and for water. When they moved, they moved slowly. The press of people and the livestock prevented haste. But that was all right, he had ceased to be in any hurry. So, he kept moving onward relentlessly toward an unsure destination. He had already come a long, long way.

He had been born in Ur of the Chaldeans. When he was in his sixties, his family had packed up and moved 700 arduous miles to Haran, where he lived until his father Terah died. As I said earlier, there was really nothing remarkable about him, except...except that he heard the voice of God. It was at Haran that he first heard the voice. He was seventy-five years old when the voice told him:

^{NIV} 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. ² "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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

The promises were extraordinary: He would become a nation. His name would be made great. He would be a blessing both to his family and to the world. The promises were so staggering in their scope that he could scarce believe that they had been directed toward him. Still, he and his band set off again. This time they moved some 400 miles down to the land of Canaan.

It was not quite what he expected. It was a godless place; filled with wickedness, human sacrifice and deviant behavior and to make things worse it was in the throes of famine.

So, he kept on moving further and further south. He moved all the way down to Egypt. And he admired the land as he went. Even in the midst of famine, he was able to discern the beauty of the place. He could see its potential. Surely, when God supplied rain this land flowed with milk and honey. But the drought and the famine it produced pushed him and his band ever onward ever downward toward Egypt.

Ah...Egypt. He had made mistakes in Egypt. He had lost sight of the promises that the voice had made and he had run a foul of the king there. Pharaoh, the king, had caught a glimpse of his wife and had sought to make her a part of his harem. To his shame, he had concocted a ridiculous story about her being only a sister but he had been caught in his lie. Had it not been for the intervention of

God, he would have lost her there. His heart ached at the thought of the ordeal for despite her age, his wife was still just as beautiful as she had been the day they married.

He and his band rushed as fast as they could back to the security of Canaan.

But even there, there was trouble. His nephew's herdsmen and his own herdsmen began to squabble over who would graze where. They decided to separate. But this time, he left the choice of who went where to his nephew. He nephew followed the grass and the water and he was left to wander the barren hills for sustenance, but that was alright because no sooner had they separated than the voice came to him again.

^{NIV} Genesis 13:14...The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

He was speechless. To the remarkable promises already made to him, God had now added the promise of the land...and the promise of descendants. He laughed at the thought. Now with the drought broken, the land had become beautiful. He could see it. He could smell its richness. He could drink from its flowing streams; he could eat of its produce. That part he believed.

But descendants... that part was harder. He and his wife were nearly eighty and the time of child bearing had long since passed away. He had even come to accept the fact that his wife was barren. They had tried; they had prayed but

nothing, absolutely nothing, had happened. And now there was this promise...of descendents and not just descendents but descendents as numerous (*How had the voice put it?*) as the dust of the earth.

Then, there was disaster.

A consortium of marauding kings had marched down on the valley of grass and water and taken his nephew captive. He was perplexed. On the one hand, he had received great and gracious promises from God. On the other hand, his blood-kin had fallen captive to godless men. Was this God, whom he followed so far, really able to deliver such wonderful promises and yet unable to protect his nephew?

The old man mustered his servants.

With three hundred and eighteen men, he staged a daring night attack. He recovered his nephew and he set to rout an army much larger than his own. He recovered his nephew and all the wealth that the marauders had stolen. And most importantly, he had done so without losing a single person. He could have made himself rich with all the goods he had recovered but he had already decided not to. He had made a vow to God that he would not keep one single thing recovered. And he knew from the nature of his success, that God was with him. He knew that his God was a trustworthy God.

But that had been years ago. For all the wonderful certainty and exhilaration he had felt then, the tedium of all the waiting he had done since had taken its toll.

As I said earlier, he was restless.

He was wandering around in a strange and beautiful land...waiting.

His name was Abram and he was eighty-five years old and he had no children.

And it had been years since he had heard the voice. And then in the darkness of his tent, as he lay not far from his aging wife, it came.

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:1**...After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: **"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."**

He knew, in a moment, that God was with him. He could see clearly the way God had preserved him down in Egypt. He could see the hand of God in the deliverance of his nephew. He could see everything, everything except the child that did not exist. He believed that God was his shield. There was no denying it. He had been preserved; he had been protected. He could see the land. But the child, the child that did not exist, troubled him. He gathered all his courage and he spoke back to the voice.

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:2**...But Abram said, **"O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"**

He was asking about the reward. He wasn't asking about the land. He was asking about the child. He knew that God knew the custom of the day. He knew that God knew that a man's property went to his chief servant if he had no heirs. But God spoke back.

^{NIV} Genesis 15:4...Then the word of the LORD came to him: "**This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.**" ⁵ He took him outside and said, "**Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them.**" Then he said to him, "**So shall your offspring be.**"

God drew him from his bed and pulled him out into the dark, moonless, wilderness night. The stars loomed before him, vast and infinite in number. And he believed God and God accepted his faith as righteousness. He could see now that God was indeed with him. He knew all that God said was true. But God brought to his mind the fullness of all the promises that He had made. And God said:

^{NIV} Genesis 15:7...He also said to him, "**I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.**"

When Abram asked his next question, it was not a question of doubt but rather **one of expectation and anticipation. It was not; "Oh God is it really true?"** Rather, it was **"Oh God, such things are too wonderful for me. How will you do such a thing?"**

^{NIV} Genesis 15:8...But Abram said, "**O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"**

And God's answer was strange and wonderful.

^{NIV} Genesis 15:9...So the LORD said to him, "**Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.**" ¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

Abram knew the ritual. It was the ritual of the blood covenant. It was practiced though rarely, with awesome solemnity, throughout the land. When two men, usually a king and his servant, made promises to each other, they took an animal and sacrificed it. Sometimes they just killed it. Sometimes they cut the animals in two and walked through the dismembered pieces. But what they were promising to each other was fidelity and faithfulness. They were saying to each other, **“Let it be to me as it is to these animals, if I do not fulfill all that I have sworn to do.”**

It was a violent ritual. It was filled with blood and gore and it was never made lightly. Usually the men making the contract were of different social orders. But it was always an agreement of enormous significance. The higher-ranking man sometimes Promised Land or protection and the more common man promised obedience and loyalty. But the implications were extraordinary.

Abram killed and arranged the animals. He cut the larger animals in half and arranged the parts across from each other. He killed the birds but did not divide them. The blood pooled around the animals and it was only a matter of minutes before the vultures appeared. Abram drove them away till darkness came and waited. And then he slumped down near the slaughtered animals overcome by exhaustion. And Abram was covered with the terror of night and blackness, which was just as well because God came down in the darkness.

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:12...**As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. 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. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out**

with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

As Abram lay there in deep sleep, the voice of God drew near and told him everything. He told him again that he would indeed have descendants but he told him more. God told Abram that his descendants would be oppressed and be slaves for four hundred years. Apparently, the four rows of animals represented the four hundred years of slavery they would endure. Each row represented a generation or a hundred years. But then God gave Abram assurance that at the end of that time, his descendants would not only come out of slavery but would come out with great wealth and many possessions. God told Abram that he would judge the nation that oppressed them.

But God did not stop there. He told Abram that he would live to a ripe old age. God told him that his life would be one of peace. He also told Abram that when his descendants returned to the land that it would be because the iniquity of the Amorites had reached full measure. God intended to use his descendants to judge the people of the land of Canaan.

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:17**...When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

And to confirm all that God had told him, God came down and passed between the dismembered animals. God was making the covenant with Abram. It was unilateral and unconditional. God would indeed bring it to pass. Abram was not passing through the pieces; God was passing through alone. So the certainty of the covenant was not dependent on Abram or his descendants but was solely

dependent on the faithfulness of God. Of course, Abram and his descendants had an obligation to be obedient to all the stipulations God demanded but the basis of the covenant was not their obedience. The basis of the covenant was God's sovereign kindness.

And we know that God faithfully kept his covenant with Abram. We know that because the human instrument God used to record this story was the very man God used to bring his covenant people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses wrote this story to give the children of Israel of sense of God's covenant faithfulness. All that God had promised Abraham had come to pass. The four hundred years of slavery had passed. God's people had come out of Egypt bringing the wealth of Egypt with them.

All that remained was for them to take possession of the land. And there it was. All that God had promised to give them lay before them. Moses was reminding the Israelites that they had a reason to believe that God would be faithful to all that He had promised. That is why he made the point again that:

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:18**...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—**

Just as Abram had fended off the birds of prey from devouring the animal carcasses, so now the covenant God had made with Abram fended off the enemies of God's people. God viewed Abram as his great friend and He had promised to defend his seed. He had promised to see his promises through.

Now, the purpose of this study is to explain the basis for our understanding of something called covenant theology. Over the next few weeks, I will be discussing what we mean by covenant theology. I will be discussing why we look at things differently than other denominations.

Eventually, I will be discussing the issue of sacraments including why we baptize infants and why we think frequent observance of the Lord's Supper is not only a good idea but thoroughly biblical. But before that, it is appropriate to discuss what I mean by the word "**covenant**".

The children's catechism defines a covenant as "**an agreement between two parties**". But there are many other definitions. One able writer has defined a covenant as "**the friendship of God**". By that, I think the writer meant that any covenant is a sign of the graciousness of God. That is certainly true. God had no obligation to relate to His creatures before the fall or after. But He chose to do so. Of course, God is so far transcendent over His creatures that any relationship between He and His creatures is an act of condescension on His part.

Even at the beginning with Adam, when God came down into the garden to walk with Adam, it was an act of wonderful grace on God's part to communicate with Adam. How much more was it an act of grace to commune with Adam after the fall? But He did.

How much more was it an act of grace for God to commune with Adam's seed after Him? But He did.

For now we will use that short definition. A covenant is an **“agreement between two parties”**.

When Adam was in the garden the agreement was clear. **“Do this and you shall live?”** But Adam did not keep the covenant and the consequences were horrific for both Adam and his descendents.

On the other hand, with Abraham, the command was believe this and you shall live. And he did and the consequence was just as wonderful for he and his descendents as it had been terrible for Adam and seed. Of course, the blessing that Abraham and his descendents received was all based upon the atoning work of Christ.

Somewhere along the way, God had to provide a Savior who would **“Do this that we might live.”**

Let's pray.