

## THE PROMISE OF JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (2)

*The aim of this session is to provide a chronological overview to the Bible story from the call of Abraham (Genesis 12) to the establishment of the nation of Israel (Judges 21).*

Sinful humanity is scattered at Babel. Although God promises to preserve his creation and to protect it from the sin of man, how can he now restore creation and make himself known to a human race that is dispersed, divided and rebellious against him? Answer: God makes another covenant.

### FROM NOMADS TO THE NATION OF ISRAEL

#### **God makes a covenant with one man (Abraham)**

- God narrows his covenant promise to Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:16-29).
- By grace, God promises Abraham a land, a people and a blessing (Ge. 12:2-3, cf. Luke 1:72-73).
- By choosing Abraham, God shows he is not turning his back on the world. Through Abraham, God will build a nation to represent him in the world.
- The outward sign of this covenant is circumcision (Ge. 17:1-14, cf. Deut. 10:16, 30:6). (This marks them out as a covenant people.)
- What was required of Abraham in this covenantal promise is faith (cf. Ro. 4:3, Gal. 3:6, Heb. 11:8-12; Jas. 2:23-24; Eph. 2:8-9).

#### **Comment:**

Abraham's call is God's answer to humanity's problem at Babel (Ge. 11). What God promised Abraham were the very things that the people coveted and were denied at Babel in Ge. 11:1-4 i.e. a great name, family and land. At Babel, humanity sought to build God out of the world. Through Abraham, God will build a nation that will represent him in the world.

This was a significant step forward in God's redemption plan. 'The obedience of one man,' Joyce Baldwin wrote (1986:33), 'was to make possible the beginning of God's cosmic plan of salvation, which in Christ was open out into undreamed riches for all who hope in Christ.'

Circumcision marks them out as God's covenant people. Abraham's descendants are to do this to show their uniqueness and to remind them that they are God's chosen people, separated from the world. This separation is not meant to be spatial but moral and religious (cf. 'circumcise your hearts' Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

God reaffirms his promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. Following the customs of the ancient Near East, animals were cut in half and laid opposite one another. The covenant partners were to walk through it, thereby invoking a curse on themselves if they broke the covenant.

Significantly only God passes through the middle. Abraham was asleep (Ge. 15:12). In other words, the covenant between God and Abraham depends on God alone.

Why did God choose Canaan as the Promised Land? In terms of climate, Canaan was semi-arid. It was not as fertile as the Nile or as isolated as Australia e.g. if agricultural abundance, safety or purity of the people were God's chief concern.

What sets Canaan apart was its geographic relationship to other lands and peoples. It was at the crossroads of the ancient world. God's people were to be on display for the nations. What better place than at the centre of the major trade route of their times between Asia Minor, Asia and Africa.

Rather than send his witnesses out in the world e.g. New Testament, God in the Old Testament sets Israel in the midst of the nations for all to see.

### **The patriarch's response to God's covenant (Genesis 12 to Genesis 50)**

- The story of the patriarchs (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) shows how God's covenant promise faces constant threats to its fulfilment e.g. famines, barrenness of their wives, lack of trust in God, family disputes etc.
- The patriarchs remembered God's promise but forgot their mission i.e. to maintain their uniqueness as God's covenant people in order to bless to the nations.
- Abraham's seed multiplied into a nation but were enslaved in Egypt (cf. Ex. 1:1-14). God's promise of seed, land, and blessing was only partially fulfilled.

### **Comment:**

Abraham, like Israel, was not called because of any inherent merit (cf. Deut. 7:7-10). The first thing that Abraham did after he received God's promise of a seed is to surrender the promised mother of a promised people to Pharaoh. He does it again in Genesis 20. Similarly, his son Isaac does the same in Genesis 26. They feared the power of kings rather than trust in the promise of God.

The many crises - e.g. famines, barrenness of the patriarch wives, family disputes etc. - shows the many threats to God's promise. The biological survival of the promised seed is always under danger.

As Kidner observed (1967:113), 'the promise of a son dominates chapters 12 to 20 by its tantalizing delay, while Abram alternately jeopardizes it by failures of nerve and hope (chapters 12, 16, 20) and holds to it by faith (chapters 15, 17, 18).'

Can God keep his promise to Abraham? Will he keep his end of the covenant promise even when his covenant partners do not? At times it seems the greatest threat to God's covenant promise is the patriarch's themselves.

God's grace, however, is evident throughout. He chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob not because they were righteous. The story of the patriarchs underscores the graciousness of God (cf. Ro. 9:1-18). God's covenant with Abraham depends on God's promise alone. He alone will carry it out (cf. Ge. 15:12).

They were chosen to serve God's purposes i.e. to glorify him among the nations. What is required of Abraham in this covenantal promise is faith (cf. Ro. 4:3, Gal. 3:6, Jas. 2:23, Eph. 2:8-9).

*How can God work in history to achieve a worldwide result of salvation when the patriarch's failed their mission?*

*How will God fulfil his promise to Abraham – seed, land, blessing – when Israel are enslaved in a land not their own?*

### **God makes a covenant with one nation (Moses and Israel)**

- By grace, God remembers his covenant promise to Abraham (Ex. 2:23-25). God confirms and expands this covenant to include a nation (cf. Ex. 6:6-8).
- God reveals himself as 'Yahweh' or the LORD, a God who is faithful to his covenant promises (Exodus 3:13-15).
- The Exodus experience reveals the general pattern of God's plan of restoring mankind and the world to a right relationship with him e.g. deliverance, community, relationship, blessing (cf. Ex. 6:6-8).
- God's act of judgment and deliverance taught Israel an important principle i.e. God saves by substitution (Ex. 12:1-28, cf. John 1:29, 1Co. 5:7).
- God gives Israel the Law (cf. Ex. 19-24). The Law is a function of the covenant. The Law does not create a relationship (cf. Ex. 19:4-5, 20:1-2) but shows how the people are to relate to God, to one another and to the world as God's covenant people.
- Obedience to the Law maintains the covenant relationship (cf. Ex. 19:3-6). Blessings will follow obedience. Curses will result from disobedience (cf. Deut. 28).
- Obedience to the Law serves a missionary purpose. Israel, as a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation,' is to be a model of what life under the rule of God is like and in turn attract other nations to the glory of her LORD (cf. Ex. 19:6; Isa. 49:6).
- Israel is more than just a vassal state. God is not only king, he is also a father to his people (cf. Ex. 4:22, Deut. 8:5, 26:18). The prophets use the image of marriage to emphasise the closeness of the covenant relationship (e.g. Hos. 1-3, Jer. 2-3, Eze. 16, Isa. 54).

### **Comment:**

God's covenant with the nation of Israel is similar in form to the Hittite Suzerain treaties of the time. (The Hittite king is known as the suzerain.) Such treaties followed a fixed formula with 6 components. God used the Hittite treaty to teach Israel about how he wants them to relate to him.

1. *Preamble* – identifying the parties involved (cf. Ex. 20:2a).

2. *Historical prologue* – reviewed any former relationships between the parties (cf. Ex. 20:2b).
3. *Stipulations* – requirements that would regulate the relationship (e.g. 'Ten Commandments' Ex. 20:3-17; cf. Ex. 21-23).
4. *Provision for safeguarding the document and annual public reading* (cf. Ex. 24:1-11; 25:16; 31:9-11).
5. *Witnesses* – this usually involves each party swear an oath before his god invoking them as witnesses, but the LORD is his own witness (cf. Heb. 6:13-18; Ex. 24:4-8).
6. *Blessings and curses* – which spells out the benefits of obedience and penalties for disobedience (Ex. 23:20-23; Deut. 28).

'As a commonly known convention in the ancient world,' Williams wrote (2005:143), 'the Hittite treaty offered a strategic model for God to apply his covenant, saying in effect: You see that Hittite treaty? My relationship is like that.'

It is important to note that the Law did not create relationship. Israel is to keep the Law not in order to become God's people. They were called to keep the Law because they already were God's people.

Or to put it another way, God saved them so that they would obey. God did not save them because they had obeyed. The Law shows the kind of conduct fitting for God's covenant community. It was meant to be a gift and not a burden (cf. Ps. 119:52, 70, 72, 92, 97, 105). The Law makes clear what is only dimly perceived by fallen human beings about God's moral law.

The Law also exists for Israel's benefit. It was not given to make life difficult or burdensome (e.g. the error of the Pharisees). Over and over again Scriptures says the point of the Law is 'that it may go well with you' (Deut. 6:18, cf. 4:40, 5:33, 6:24, 12:28, 30:15-20).

## EXERCISE

\* *Do these questions first.*

1. **\*Read Genesis 12:1-3. What did God promise Abraham? What is the purpose of this covenant? How is this purpose related to God's covenant through Adam?**

God's promise or covenant to Abraham has three important elements i.e. people, land and blessing. From the scattered and sinful humanity, God will choose a particular people as his special possession (cf. Gen. 17:7). Where Adam was landless, they will have their own land (Gen. 17:8).

The promise of a seed or descendants is not new, but a development from the earlier promise in Genesis 3:15. Abraham's offspring will be God's definitive answer to the problem of sin and the means of God's redemption plan.

The elements of people (seed), land and blessing reappears again to Abraham (Gen. 22:17-18), to Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15).

Through Abraham and his descendents, God will set the world right correcting the curses of the Fall (Gen. 3) and restoring the blessings of creation. The whole world will be blessed through Abraham. This worldwide focus is reflected in Abram's name change from 'exalted father' to 'father of a multitude.'

**2. 'The greatest threat to the covenant of God is the people of God.'**  
**Discuss this statement in light of Abraham's (Ge. 12:10-16, 16:1-2, 20:1-2) and Isaac's actions (Ge. 26:6-11). What did God promise? How did they respond? What lessons can we learn from this today?**

God promised Abraham will have a child. But you can't have a child without a wife. Nor was he supposed to circumvent God's plan and produce a child through his wife's maid-servant Hagar. Abraham feared human kings more than he trusted God.

Christians are part of the new covenant through Jesus. We too inherit many great promises e.g. forgiveness of sin, gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life, and so on, yet how often we too fail to obey God because of a lack of trust. God, however, remains faithful as he did with the patriarchs.

The story of Genesis shows us that despite the faithlessness of his covenant partners, God remains faithful. His covenant purposes cannot be thwarted.

**3. Read Galatians 3:15-29. Summarise in your own words what Paul meant in this passage. Who is the promised seed? What is the place of the Law? How is this relevant to us today?**

**4. \*Read Exodus 6:6-8. What did God do or promise he will do? How does this covenant mediated through Moses expand and confirm his earlier covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3?**

God makes seven 'I will' statements in Exodus 6:6-8 where four promises are made to the nation of Israel.

*God promises to deliver his people from oppression.*

- I will bring you out;
- I will free you;
- I will redeem you.

*God promises to form his people into a new community.*

- I will take you as my own people.

*God promises his people a personal relationship with them.*

- I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

*God promises his people a life of abundance and blessings.*

- I will bring you to the land;
- I will give it to you as a possession.

Together, these promises show us the nature of God's redemption. This is not a new plan. Rather it confirms and expands on his earlier promises to Abraham

(Gen. 12:2-3). What is new here is a new understanding of God's presence i.e. what will life be like in the LORD's presence?

We see this pattern of deliverance, community, relationship and blessing in the New Testament where Christ frees us from the bondage of sin, forms us into a new community i.e. church, gives us the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life in God's presence.

Behind this deliverance of a people from slavery lies a wider purpose. Israel is to be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6). By this, God meant that he intended his people be set apart, wholly dedicated to the knowledge and service of God. They were to be a special nation and so it follows that every detail of their lives mattered.

The nation of Israel, like the patriarchs, is to be a model of what life under the rule of God is like and in turn attract other nations to the glory of her LORD (cf. Isa. 49:6). In other words, there is more to God's rescue plan than the physical act of deliverance itself. God doesn't just save us *from* something. God also saves us *for* something.

**5. \*Read Exodus 12:1-13. What is the Passover? What important principle do we learn from this event? How is this related to Jesus i.e. 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29, cf. Rev. 5:6-7) who also died at a Passover (John 13:1; cf. Luke 22:1)?**

The Passover refers to the time when God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. How did God redeem his people? God sent ten plagues against Egypt. In the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, God passed over the land in judgment and killed every firstborn child and animal in Egypt.

Even Israelite children deserved to die but God gave them a way of escape (cf. Ex. 12:1-28). Each family had to kill a lamb and smear the blood on the doorposts.

*The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exodus 12:13)*

This act of judgment and deliverance taught the Israelites an important principle. God saves by substitution. All sinful people deserve to die under God's condemnation, but some will escape through the death of a substitute in their place.

This deliverance prepares us for a greater deliverance to come. The first Passover in Egypt is a shadow of what Jesus did on the cross. Today, it is Jesus, the Lamb of God (cf. John 1:29, 1Cor. 5:7) who died in our place so that we won't die for our sins. It is not a historical coincidence that Jesus was crucified at the Passover festival (cf. Matt. 26:19, John 19:31).

**6. Read Mark 14:12, 22-25 and Matthew 26:17, 26-29. What is the significance of the Lord's Supper, Jesus' final meal at the Passover festival? What did Jesus mean when he said, 'this is my blood of the covenant'?**

To the first century Jew, the Passover meal symbolized 'forgiveness of sins,' God's victory over Pharaoh and the redemption of his people. For Christians, Jesus is the Passover lamb (cf. 1Co. 5:7). When Jesus points to his own blood, he is proclaiming that everything that the Passover celebration symbolizes will ultimately be achieved through him. Jesus viewed his death as a representative death for many. In and through Jesus is the new exodus.

### **Passover**

In old age of law

Festival meal celebrating birth of God's people i.e. Israel

Participants associated with deliverance and old covenant

Looks back to Exodus and forward to God's salvation

### **Lord's Supper**

In the new age of kingdom

Celebratory meal of birth of God's people i.e. church

Participants associated with redemption and new covenant

Looks back to cross and forward to final realization of God's kingdom when Jesus comes again

Adapted from Garland (1996:533)

### **The nation's response to God's covenant (Joshua to Judges)**

- Through unbelief and rebellion, the nation of Israel failed to obey the Law. As a result, most died in the wilderness under God's judgment (cf. Num.).
- The Joshua narrative traces the partial fulfilment of God's promise of a land.
- God didn't let Joshua finish the job because he wanted the God's covenant people i.e. Israel, to learn an important lesson of faith (Judg. 2:20-22).

*Will the nation be faithful to God in obeying the Law and enjoy the full blessing of a land?*

- The Judges narrative shows the nation's failure to keep their end of the covenant.
- A pattern of backsliding, repentance, deliverance, and backsliding (cf. Judg. 2:10-19) repeats itself and worsens over time resulting in idolatry and civil war (cf. Judg. 17-21).

### **Comment:**

The sin cycle in Judges underscores Israel's failure to keep God's covenant. The nation of Israel took God's covenantal promises for granted. They wanted to enjoy God's promise of the land without obedience to God's ways. Something needs to be fixed in terms of Israel's ability to uphold God's covenant.

*Like the divided and rebellious humanity at Babel, the story of Judges ends with a crisis. God's own covenant people are divided against one another and worshipped other gods. How can God's covenant promise be fulfilled if his own covenant people disobey? **FIND OUT NEXT WEEK!***