

A Promise for You

Genesis 12:1-3

Preface

This morning I wish to address a monumental subject—God’s *covenant of grace*. It is my opinion that the covenant, or promise, of grace is best appreciated from the perspective of what is called *covenant theology*.¹ In *covenant theology* we see the proper continuity of God’s unfolding grace throughout time.

The impact that a proper understanding of this subject will have in the life of a Christian is inestimable. The confusion and discontinuity many of us experience in our reading of the Scriptures will begin to ebb. The morning fog of understanding the plan of God—visible and invisible—temporal and eternal—will slowly burn away. God’s provision and man’s proper response to that provision will have added clarity. Our Christian conduct as citizens, family members, and church members will be more properly perceived, and much, much more.

What is God’s *covenant of grace*? Why is it glorious to God and profitable for man? How is it administrated (or worked out in a practical way) and what kind of effect should we expect it to have? These are some of the questions we will seek to answer in this series. This morning we will merely put our toes in the water but in time we will see ripples extend across the entire lake.

It is my prayer that an examination of the broad footings of God’s covenant will yield in us greater sagacity (quickness of thought, shrewdness, discernment) in the specifics of our relationship with Him. Church, evangelism, pietism, marriage, parenting, politics, etc. are all brought to greater light via a proper understanding of God’s covenant.

Introduction

Time began with, and will end with, paradise. In the beginning a good God formed a good creation from the breath of His mouth (Genesis 1, 2) and a good God will be the glorious and eternal light of heaven for His servants when time comes to a close (Revelation 22). In between the first and second paradise we have the pomp, panoply, and treachery of human history.

This history chronicles the love and hate, good and evil, of man, his successes and failures, his noble efforts and his shameful passivity. But more than this, it reveals man’s never-ending yet fruitless quest for autonomous significance and self-actualization. It is this quest for human sovereignty that our Creator responds to in Psalm 2 when, in His fury, He declares:

**Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?
²The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,
³Let us break Their bonds in pieces
And cast away Their cords from us.”
⁴He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.**

¹ Covenant theology over and against the paradigm of dispensationalism.

**⁵Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure (Psalm 2:1-5)**

We are loath to find a viable political candidate to whom these words do not apply.

Be that as it may, between the two paradises we also have the Creator's intervention in the very history He produced. It has been the uniform testimony of Bible scholars that God's purpose in history, contrary to man's purpose, is to bring glory to that which is the only reasonable object of glory, Himself—"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

History, therefore, from the Christian perspective is designed for the glory of God and everything works toward that end—even things we might not suspect.

**The Lord has made all for Himself,
Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Proverbs 16:4)**

The events and passions of history, both good and evil, will bring glory to God. We must therefore understand that even the fall of man, for which Adam and his descendents are fully culpable, was designed for the rich glory of God.

When we know fully, as we are fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12), it will become apparent that the corruption, bloodshed, oppression, and heartbreak inflicted on humanity by humanity had a just and holy end—the glory of God. And the knowledge of this will yield, in the glorified sons of God, an unfeigned and eternal, "Amen."
"Surely the wrath of man shall praise You" (Psalm 76:10).

And there can be no doubt that the brightest shining ornament of God's magnanimity (noble generosity) is the deliverance of His only begotten Son into the hands of sinful men (John 3:16). It is to the sacrificial Lamb of God that the heavenly host sings the new song:

**You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).**

How does the *covenant of grace* (understood in the context of *covenant theology*) fit into this equation? It is between the two paradises that God presents man's only hope. The foundation of this hope is God's promise—His *covenant*—His contract with man.

Two Other Covenants

Parenthetically I would like to briefly address the two other principle covenants we see in Scripture. Before history the Father covenanted with the Son to give Him a people—a bride (John 17; Galatians 3:16). This is sometimes called the *covenant of redemption*.² At the beginning of history God made a covenant with Adam that was dependent upon his perfect and perpetual obedience. This is sometimes called the *covenant of works* (Genesis 2:17).

These two covenants relate to the *covenant of grace* in that the *covenant of redemption* (a bride for Christ) necessitated the deliverance of the bride by Christ. The *covenant of works* (since its foundation is God's holiness and justice) was not swept away or ignored

² This is called redemption for it was made with a full knowledge of the fall and need for the bride to be redeemed (or bought back).

but fulfilled by the second Adam who is Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45). In short, the *covenant of redemption* and the *covenant of works* necessitated the *covenant of grace*.

Announcing the Covenant of Grace

The covenant of grace enters immediately after the loss of paradise. No sooner did the serpent exercise his crafty and successful deception resulting in the fall of man than God announces His plan to redeem what Adam lost. With open force God avows His intentions. How these words of God must have pounded in the ears of the serpent,

**And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).**

Little wonder that two of the four gospels begin by tracing that promised seed to Jesus (Matthew 1:1-18; Luke 3:23-38). So prominent was God’s covenant that Peter, at the dawning of the New Covenant Church, preaches God’s promise with little explanation, no doubt assuming a prior knowledge of this glorious message in the minds of his audience.

For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:39).

God’s administration of this covenant of grace begins immediately by His clothing of Adam and Eve with animal skins (which required the shed blood of animals—Genesis 3:21). This displaced their futile effort (fig leaves—Genesis 3:7) of covering their own shame. The administration of this covenant of grace is further seen when Cain and Abel offer sacrifices (Genesis 4:3-5) indicating some knowledge of the necessity of shed blood for the redemption of sin.³ In Abel these sacrifices were accompanied by a genuine faith in Christ (Hebrews 11:4).

The Abrahamic Covenant

God will restate His covenant of grace many times throughout Scripture. We see this with Noah (Genesis 6, 9) but in a much more detailed manner with Abraham (Genesis 12-17). The root of God’s covenant (a root which will eventually explode into a great tree covering all the earth in the New Covenant) is found in Genesis 12:1-3.

**Now the Lord had said to Abram:
“Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father’s house,
To a land that I will show you.
²I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
³I will bless those who bless you,**

³ This is opposed to Dispensationalism which, though it asserts salvation by grace through faith for old covenant saints, does not recognize that the saints in that dispensation (of conscience) had any conscious notion of a suffering Christ—see *The New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Dr. Robert L. Reymond, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, p. 508)

**And I will curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
(Genesis 12:1-3)**

The one promise (the seed crushing the head of the serpent—Genesis 3:15) now unfolds into three promises: 1) the establishment of a great nation, 2) blessings for those who bless that nation and curses for those who curse that nation, and 3) a promise of universal blessings to Abraham’s seed. How are Christians to understand these promises?

A Great Nation

What is this great nation which is such an integral aspect of God’s covenant of grace? Disclosure of this nation is found in one of our favorite Christmas passages.

**For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isaiah 9:6, 7).**

So the nation is a nation firmly planted on the shoulders of Christ. In other words its very existence is dependent upon the zeal of its King. And since its King is God almighty, it is a nation that shall continually increase (more on this momentarily). But who makes up this kingdom? Who are the covenant people—its citizens?

The New Testament becomes our commentary to understand the Old Testament. Peter, writing to Christians (the churches), explains,

**But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*,
His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him
who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9,
emphasis mine).**

Epiphany number one in our understanding of the covenant of grace (as it was given to Abraham) is that the nation (which in seed form was the nation of Israel) is to be understood by Christians as the church. Peter’s letter is to us—those who gather as a community to hear and acknowledge the word of God.

Bless and Curse

This second aspect of the covenant of grace (as it was given to Abraham) involves blessings and curses—“**I will bless those who bless you and I will curse Him who curses you.**” Who, then, are the objects of this protection and what are the mechanisms by which they are protected?

If we follow the flow of the text we recognize that the object of this protection is the aforementioned nation (the church). This is consistent with the passage in Isaiah which promises continual increase (Isaiah 9:7; 26:15)—the interpretation of the image in Daniel where the stone crushes the image and becomes a mountain covering the

earth (Daniel 2:35), the river flowing from the temple which starts shallow then becomes an impassable deluge, (Ezekiel 47) and the kingdom parables teaching God's kingdom starting small and growing large like a mustard seed or leaven (Matthew 13).

Numerous are the passages which speak of the un-halting advancement of God's kingdom.

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them (Hebrews 8:11).

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

There is little doubt that this aspect of God's covenant was behind the comforting words of John to the seven churches in Revelation who by short-sighted and temporal observations were dwarfed by the power of Rome. What glorious comfort for them (and for us) to realize that it is the church's King who is "**the ruler over the kings of the earth**" (Revelation 1:5).

The second aspect of this gracious Abrahamic Covenant is powerfully presented, once again, in Psalm 2 where we read of the consequences of falling into the derision (a position of scorn or contempt) of God:

**Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the Lord with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish *in* the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:10-12).**

In short, the second aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is that the church, as a world sanctifying entity, will be overwhelmingly victorious over all assaults and ungodliness.

All The Families

Thus far we have learned that God has covenanted/promised that He would extend His grace to form a nation/church that has His promise of protection and victory. Finally He declares the final aspect of His promise to Abraham that "**in [him]...all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

This third facet of the covenant assures the recipients of God's grace that 1) His grace will be widespread—all the families (tribes, clans, ethnic groups, etc., and 2) they will be reached by His blessing. We will finish this study by allowing the Apostle Paul to elucidate as to the nature of this blessing.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." ⁹ So then those who *are* of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (Galatians 3:8, 9).

This passage informs us that this protected nation/church is comprised of people whom God has justified. The means by which God has justified these people is by granting them faith (Philippians 1:29). So the true and protected citizens of this holy nation are those who, like Abraham, have faith in the seed who is Christ.

Justification (right standing and acquittal before God) by faith (trusting not in self but in Christ alone) is, no doubt, the richest aspect of the covenant. The genuine nature and viability of this protected nation/church is faith in Christ. The church lives or dies by virtue of the continuation of faith.

The nation of Israel (which was the old covenant church/nation) exhibited an ebb and flow of faithfulness. Eventually the nation (in terms of its role as Christ's church) descended to such utter faithlessness that it was divorced by God (Jeremiah 3:8) and given to a **"nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43).**

And though, as we have established, the church will be sure in her success, the warning for individual churches and individual Christians is to persevere in that faith lest Christ remove their lampstands from their place (Revelation 2:5).

Our next question, now that we see our citizenship in this greater light, is what is God's provision for the maintenance, viability, and flourishing of His nation. What is the means by which that faith is fanned, kept alive, and made airborne for the deliverance of the nations? This we shall pursue when next we gather.

Questions for Study

1. How did history begin? How will it end (page 1)?
2. How does God respond to man's quest for autonomy (pages 1, 2)?
3. What is God's purpose in history (page 2)?
4. What are the things that work toward God's purpose in history (page 2)?
5. What is the greatest contributor to God's purpose in history (page 2)?
6. Name the three principle covenants in Scripture (page 3).
7. Where is the covenant of grace first announced (page 3)?
8. What are the three aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant (page 3)?
9. What is the nation of which God speaks in Genesis 12:2 (page 4)?
10. Discuss whom God will bless or curse in relation to His covenant (page 5).
11. What is the nature of all the families of the earth being blessed in Abraham (pages 5, 6)?