

Five Key Events of the Old Testament

Key Event #2 – Covenant

God's Chosen Way To Be In Relationship With His People

Scripture

Genesis
Chapters 15, 16, 17

Hand movement

Cross arms forming
X over chest

INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of this series is that we will all be able to tell the story of the Old Testament --- by memorizing just five words. So each week, we will need to review. We began the series last week with the Key Event: **Creation**. Each Key Event has a hand motion that should help us to remember and the hand motion for **Creation** was: (Big Circle.) Today we move to the second Key Event. ---- **Covenant**. The hand motion for **Covenant** is: (Cross arms over chest.) Repeat. So the movement between the two is simple. (Make circle and move into the crossing of arms over

chest.)

But what does this word **Covenant** mean? It is certainly not a word that we use every day. In fact, it's one of those words like hymn or sacrament or even sin ... one of those words we mostly use at church. When we buy or sell a house, we don't talk about signing a covenant --- we sign a contract. When we arrange a new business venture, we don't close the covenant – we close the deal. When countries come to an agreement on the terms for peace, they don't sign a covenant. They sign a treaty. When we assure someone that we will do something ... We don't say: I covenant with you. We say I promise you. And yet, by definition, the word covenant could be used in any of those situations. Covenant is, in its simplest form ... just an agreement between two parties. It is a solemn oath made binding by word or action.

And though it may not be common in our everyday language, it is common, very common in the language of the Bible --- particularly the Old Testament. Listen to this: Would you believe that the word covenant is used 311 times in the Old Testament? That's just 6 times less than the word love. The word covenant appears even more often than the word sin. No doubt about it folks. Covenant is a major theme of this Holy Book. In fact, the story of the Old Testament couldn't even be told without the concept of covenant. From the rainbow in Noah's bright blue sky to the final book of the Old Testament, when Malachi predicts the messenger of the covenant coming like refiner's fire **Covenant is THE word that best describes God's chosen relationship with humanity.** (Repeat).

And though the word appears less often in the New Testament, it is still central to our understanding of Jesus Christ as our salvation. Why at the last supper, Jesus himself used the idea of covenant as a way of explaining his ministry and his death --- Remember, he held up the cup to give us a new sign, saying: This is my blood of the new covenant, given for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

In fact, so important is this idea of covenant in the bible that the word became the name of the two parts of our Holy Book. You see the Greek form of the word covenant is Testament. Thus we have the Old and the New Testament or the Old and the New Covenant.

COVENANT THROUGHOUT SERIES

Now, having heard all of that, I doubt you will be surprised to hear me say that I cannot possibly tell the story of covenant in just one sermon. But the truth is --- I don't have to. You see, the development of **Covenant** in our Bible travels side by side with all our Key Events. Let me give you a quick overview of how **Covenant** fits into the whole story. As I said, the first mention of covenant is just after the flood ... when God is in the process of re-creating the world. That rainbow was the sign of a covenant made not only with Noah but with all of creation. And remember **Creation** was the first Key Event.

Next comes the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. That's what we will be focusing on today. The third Key Event is **Exodus**. While on this journey out of Egypt, Moses and the people of Israel become partners in a covenant with God.... The heart of that covenant is the Ten Commandments. In time, God establishes a covenant with King David --- the **Monarchy** which is the fourth Key Event. But alas, the people of Israel do not honor the covenant. The prophets explain the **Exile**, our fifth Key Event, as the result of the nation's failure to keep the Old Covenant and they begin to predict the New Covenant-- foretelling the night to come in a little town called Bethlehem And the rest of the New Testament or New Covenant story.

As we walk together through these Key Events, we will, in fact, be walking the way of **Covenant** ... discovering how God chooses to be in relationship with His people. And even more important ... how God chooses to be in relationship with you and me.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

That walk begins in the midst of a journey ... We need to walk for awhile with a man named Abram and his wife Sarai. They have been traveling for quite some time -- traveling -- in response to a divine call. Listen carefully to their story and you will hear in that call, an echo of the Creator God, calling again for life where there is no life. Over and over the writer tells us that Sarai had no child. Now friends, keep in mind, this is not a young couple looking for adventure and anticipating tents full of children. Far from it. Abram is 75 years old when he hears God say Go. And Sarai is not far behind. So Is it any wonder that they sometimes doubt God's promise that Abram would have a son ... that they question the power of God to bring life to Sarai's empty womb and an heir to their empty future?

Surprisingly, it is that honest doubt, along with a little disappointment and frustration thrown in, that becomes the basis for the covenant ... Look at **Genesis 15. (Read vs. 1-3)**

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

Now folks, just in case you didn't catch the drift here. Abram is not happy with God. He's had it and he doesn't want to hear anything more about rewards and greatness. He wants a son. God promised him a son and he and his wife Sarai have traveled all over the land in and around Canaan setting up altars and acquiring material wealth in anticipation of that promised son. But still Sarai has no child. What good is the land? What good is the wealth? --- without an heir to carry it into the future? Abram is tired of the promises. He's ready for action --- divine action. Abram's pilgrimage has been fueled by the promise. For years that promise from God has held its own against the reality of barrenness. But now, the barrenness appears to be winning.

Now friend, I don't pretend to know exactly where you stand on the journey ... But I do know that if you have been traveling with God for any length of time at all, then you have, at some point, stood where Abram stands. If you have been bold enough to stake your life on the promises of God then chances are that you too have, at one time or another, been frustrated by divine delay. In your frustration, maybe you too have doubted.

Sometimes even when our words declare our belief, our actions reveal our doubt. A drought threatened the crop in a village of Crete. The local priest told his congregation that it was time for the community to offer a special litany for rain. "Go to your homes," he said, "fast and pray during the week, believe and come next Sunday when we will say the litany for rain." The villagers went home fasted and prayed. They went to church the next Sunday, but when the priest saw them he was furious. "Go away," he shouted. "I can not say the litany, for you do not really believe." "But Father," they protested, "we prayed, we fasted and we do believe." "You believe, you say?" The priest questioned, "then where are your umbrellas?"

Sometimes we have a hard time admitting out doubt, even to ourselves, let alone to God. Like the New Testament father seeking Jesus' healing for his son ... we stand caught between the two. "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief." I know I have stood there, haven't you?

I guess that's why I admire Abram for being honest about his doubt, for confronting God with his disappointment. And God?...well ---God responds not with anger but with reassurance and then a sign. Lets begin at **verse 4** ...Here God restates the promise.

4 But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."

And then in **verses 5-6** ... The sign.

5 He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Now folks, I want you to realize that this time of frustration and doubt came in the very middle of Abram's walk with God. You see ... Faith is only an issue for those who are committed to living for the promise. Those are the people who have to struggle with faith. And look at what happens. God does offer Abram a sign but notice what kind of sign. There was nothing new in the sky that night. Abram had seen all those stars before but he had never recognized them as a sign ... a sign to him ... well, a sign to anyone with eyes to see. That star-filled sky was a sign pointing to the power of God. If God was great enough to fill an empty sky with stars ... surely he could fill an empty womb with life. And in that moment, Abram believed.

Friend, what signs of God's power are you failing to recognize? Most divine signs are very ordinary. They are not intended to be proofs but rather gentle reminders -- Sacraments, you might say ... the ordinary representing, reminding us of the divine.... Reassuring us that God has not forgotten.

I don't know much about hunting but I know a whole lot about loving a dog and so this story really appealed to me. Sam was one of the great dogs. To his owner he was so much more than a bird dog; he was a friend. One of the best parts of a day spent hunting was time spent with Sam – sharing lazy lunches and an afternoon nap under a tree. One day the hunter and his dog were in unfamiliar territory and late in the afternoon, the two were separated. The hunter called and whistled but there was no sign of Sam. Finally, he knew he would have to leave for the night But what about Sam? If the dog came back and he wasn't there, he might lose his friend forever. Then he remembered an old trick a dog trainer had passed on. He unbuttoned his jacket, removed his shirt and laid it on the ground. Then he went home and worried all night. The hunter was back to that spot early the next morning ... and sure enough, there was Sam with his nose tucked under the sleeve of his master's shirt. The dog looked up and wagged his tail as if to say: "Where you been, old friend? I've been waiting for you all night cause I knew you'd be back?"

Folks, I want you to hear this if you hear nothing else I say today. When we are lost, when we are burdened by doubt and the promises of God seem hollow and false, that is the time to start looking for the signs of God's power in our life. That is the time to remember what God has already done for us. And like the dog with his master's shirt.... That is the time to just curl up in those memories and wait... Wait and believe until the Master returns.

But back to the text. God restates the promise and with a simple sign reminds Abram of the power behind that promise and then God does more. God makes a covenant. God enters into a solemn agreement with Abram and takes a binding oath. The writer of Genesis gives an account of what seems to us to be strange behavior.

But this part about passing through the two pieces of an animal's body is in keeping with other covenant making of the time. I'm going to read **verses 17-18**.

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

Let me explain what is happening here. The animals are a kind of self curse. The one making the promise passes between the body pieces and is in effect saying: "If I do not keep my promise, it will be like this for me." It's like a really extreme version of "cross my heart and hope to die." Of course, the smoking pot and flaming torch are symbols for God, who on his own initiative makes this covenant with Abram in a way that Abram can understand and accept. The covenant is established and so All is well.

The reader, not to mention Abram gets all excited. Surely the heir will be here soon. But not so. Our balloons burst quickly, pierced by the first line of chapter 16. "*Now Sarai, Abram's wife bore him no children.*" What? Still no baby? And with that delay, you guessed it ... doubt comes knocking. And it is then, that Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands. Failing to trust God, they make their own arrangements for an heir. As was an accepted custom of the time, Abram fathers a child with Sarai's Egyptian slave-girl. Ishmael is born and Abram has an heir ... one despised by Sarai. And though God will honor him in other ways, Ishmael will not be the heir to this promise.

You know, one of the greatest temptations that travels with doubt is this desire to take matters into our own hands --- to force God to act on our time table. We've all done this. But just as God does not coerce ... so He will not be coerced. God waits 13 more years. When Abram is 99 years old, the covenant is established in a much more formal way. **Chapter 17: 4-8**

4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

That's God's part. But now, Abraham has a part too. **Verses 9-10.**

9 God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

At this point, there is a fundamental change in the nature of God's covenant with humanity. The covenant with Noah, the earlier covenant with Abram --- they were binding only to God. But now --- something is required of Abram too. In fact, this change in relationship is so important that it requires a name change. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. And then there is the act of circumcision --- a physical identification. It is to be the symbol of a new life ---not unlike our baptism --- setting us apart as a special people with a special God.

And it is at this point that we discover the real danger of Ishmael. Look at **17:17-18.**

17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!"

Do you see the danger there? Ishmael has become a threat to Abraham's faith. Abraham no longer has to believe. Abraham is willing to stake the future on Ishmael. He actually tries to convince God to do it his way --- to skip the miracle and forget these foolish promises of a newborn baby from an ancient womb.

Oh Beloved don't you see.? Isn't that what we do over and over again in life. We settle. We settle for less in life because we just can't believe that God really can do it all. And so, we stop half way, work out own substitute answers to prayer and thus close ourselves off to God's answer and His miracles.

PERMISSION TO BUILD

London business man Lindsay Clegg tells this story of a warehouse property he was selling. The building had been empty for months and needed many repairs. As he showed the property to a prospective buyer, he took pains to explain that he would repair all the damages and clean out all the garbage. But this is how the buyer responded: "Forget about the repairs. When I buy this place, I'm going to build something brand new. I don't want the building; I want the site."

That, my friends, is God's message to us. Compared with what God has in mind for us as individuals and as a church, our efforts are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball. When we become God's, the old life is over. He makes all things new. All He wants is the site and the permission to build.

CONCLUSION

That's what God wanted from Abraham and finally, that's what God got. Oh yeah, Abraham laughs, and he doubts and he bargains but finally he gets up and he acts. Abraham honors the covenant. He, Ishmael and the whole household are circumcised. And that very special relationship --- *You shall be my people and I shall be your God* --- begins here. Not in blind faith. Not in perfect obedience. No that special relationship with God that we call covenant, begins in a much more common place. It begins at that point where faith struggles with doubt and where skeptical laughter still echoes in the distance. It begins where believers meet the divine in the ordinary.... Where doubters see the power of the creator in the middle of a night time sky and the miracle of a savior in the middle of a cross. That special relationship begins ... at a place not so very different from here ... not so different from there ... right there where you sit. Abraham laughed. He doubted. And he bargained. But finally, in faith, he acted. Abraham trusted in the faithfulness of God and chose to be faithful himself. Abraham embraced the covenant. The question today is ... can you and I do the same thing?

Teachers/Leaders Discussion Guide Key Events of the OT – COVENANT

As students arrive, have them practice the hand motions and faith statements.

1. Creation --- Big Circle ---Creator Creates Creation.
2. Covenant --- Cross Hands over Chest ---God's chosen way to be in relationship with his people.
 1. Covenant is not a word commonly used in our society. Ask students if they have used the word used outside of church and Bible study and if so, how it was used. What comes to mind when they hear the word "covenant?"
 2. Abraham is remembered as a man of great faith and yet he doubted the promises of God and expressed those doubts to God. Have their been times when you have doubted God and his power to make good on His promises? Perhaps you are doubting God in some way now.
 3. When Abraham expressed his doubts to God, God gave him a sign but it was not a supernatural sign. It was the vast number of stars in the sky. It was a sign that Abram had seen many times but he did not recognize it as a sign of God's power. What signs of God's power are all around us that often go unrecognized? (People will naturally go to God's creative power which is good but encourage them to think too of ways that God has proven powerful in the lives of His people. Do you know people who have done amazing things and attributed their ability to do so to God?)
 4. Since Abram doubted God's ability to enable Sarai to have a child in his old age, he took matters into his own hands and fathered a child through a slave girl. (Point out that this was not a moral failure in that time but was an acceptable practice for producing an heir.) It was a faith failure. Can you think of

times when we are tempted to act because God is not acting on our time table and thus make bad decisions that lead to big problems in life? (Possible examples: Want to get married now so I marry the wrong person. Want to have sex before marriage, end up with a baby all of life changes. Want to be popular, behave in wrong ways. Want to be successful in business, cheat or manipulate others.)

5. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, the covenant had two parts. God would be the people's God and the People would be God's people. That meant they were not to worship any other gods. Unfortunately, the Old Testament tells us they failed miserably at their end of the covenant and were constantly chasing after foreign gods, worshiping other idols. What idols are we in danger of putting in the place that belongs only to God? (Things, other people, ourselves.)

6. The message of Abraham heralds the message to come in Jesus. God wants us --- our hearts. The whole idea is that God wants to be in relationship with us. That's the most important thing to God. But relationships take work. What could you be doing to work on your relationship with God and make it better?

Give Students a chance to share prayer requests for themselves and others. Close with prayer.