

# Covenant or Contract?

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Genesis 15:1-6

**Sermon Series:**  
A Journey of Faith –  
A Study on the Life  
of Abraham

*We...treat  
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covenant.*

It was called the wedding of the year. Kim Kardashian, one of the fabled Kardashian sisters, who, as near as I can tell, is one of those famous-for-being-famous people, married Kris Humphries, who plays power forward for the New York Nets, a professional basketball team.

The wedding, according to the tabloids, cost a cool 10 million. The wedding cake alone was \$20,000. The wedding may have been fairy tale, but the marriage itself was a bust. Their marriage lasted 72 days. Seventy-two days is about the time it takes to grow tomato plants or establish a new habit. Before you feel sorry for them, bear in mind that they pocketed 18 million for this made-for-Hollywood wedding.

I once officiated at a wedding of a marriage that lasted 72 hours. No joke! The groom called me on his honeymoon to tell me his newlywed bride had skipped town and was nowhere to be found.

People ask me about what it is like to officiate at weddings in this divorce culture. I find couples as earnest as ever about making their marriages last. What is different is how couples manage conflict. If

things don't work out, couples are far more predisposed to leave the marriage.

Earlier, you heard a strikingly candid testimony about the challenges of staying married to someone over the long haul. God intends marriage to be deeply rewarding, but be not deceived, marriage takes hard work just the same.

One contributing reason for the failure of marriage today has to do with our attitudes about marriage. We tend, these days, to treat marriage and family life more as a contract than a binding covenant. More about that later.

We are preaching a series of sermons called A Journey of Faith, drawing on Abraham's life as illustration. God comes to Abraham, in Genesis 12, out of the blue and makes three sweeping promises. God promises him land in verse 1—"Go...to the land I will show you," descendants in verse two—"I will make of you a great nation," and blessings in verse 3—"I will bless those who bless you."

God reiterates these promises in Genesis 15:1, our Scripture lesson: "Do not be afraid, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward will be very great." God doesn't specify the

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reward, but Abraham connects it to the promise of a son. Abraham blurts out the question that has been weighing on him for some time now: “What will you give me, since I remain childless?” God may be full of promises, but Abraham has little to show for it. He still lacks land and a son.

Abraham has already conceived a contingency plan. He has designated his household servant Eliezer to receive his inheritance. God reiterates to Abraham that he will have a son. The literal Hebrew translation of verse 4 is rather stark: “A son will come out of his own loins.”

God takes Abraham outside on a starlit night. “Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendents. You’re going to have a big family, Abraham” (15:6, *The Message*). The same God who fashioned stars without number can also produce a son for this barren family.

We read in verse 6, “Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). No other Old Testament text has exerted such a compelling influence on the New Testament. Paul references this passage in Romans: “Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness...so, then, he is the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:9-11). Paul writes virtually the same words in Galatians: “Consider Abraham, who believed God and it

was credited to him as righteousness” (Galatians 3:6-7). James, likewise, writes in his letter, “The Scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:23).

What did Abraham believe that led God to declare him righteous? Abraham trusted God’s promises. No matter how bleak his situation looked on the outside Abraham believed in his heart God would honor His promises.

God directs Abraham to take a heifer, goat and ram and cut them in half. I know, it sounds gross, but stay with me. In the ancient Near East, before agreements were reduced to writing, people would cut animals in half and walk between the carcasses. By doing so, they were announcing that the same fate would befall them if they failed to keep the agreement.

We read in verse 18, “On that day God made a covenant with Abraham.” God not only made a covenant with Abraham, God actually cut a covenant with him. The Hebrew word (*berit*) literally means to cut a covenant. God cuts this deal or seals this covenant with blood.

Throughout this animal cutting ritual, Abraham remains a bystander. God is the only one, in the symbolic form of fire and smoke, who actually passes between the pieces. God

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alone takes the curse upon Himself if this covenant is abrogated. Do you see hints of the cross in this symbolism?

Most relationships today are established by means of a contract. Contracts are binding so long as both parties keep the agreement. If one party fails to keep the contract, the deal is off. Most business contracts work this way.

God doesn't offer His people a contract. God creates a covenant. This covenant God offers is one-sided and unilateral. Let's go back to the story. Who initiates the covenant? God! Who sets the terms? God! Who cuts the deal? God! This covenant won't ultimately be kept by us; it will be kept by God. "I will never break my covenant with you," the Lord declares (Judges 2:1).

God's covenant is not only unilateral, it's also unconditional. God's covenant puts no conditions on our faithfulness. If we don't honor the covenant, God doesn't stop loving us.

A covenant is comparable to the ties that bind us together as family rather than a business relationship. If a parent calls a child for dinner but the child ignores the parent, the parent doesn't say, "Okay, that's it. You were late for dinner. You're out of the family." No matter how often children mess up, there is nothing they can do to make parents stop loving them. Our ties in marriage and family are meant to be

covenantal in nature rather than contractual.

The fact that God's covenant is unconditional and unilateral is really good news for us. No matter how many times we mess up, God keeps His promises.

You may be sitting here today aware that you messed up last week. You said or did something you now regret. You promised God that you would be a better Christian. You failed to say or do the right thing. Relax, folks! This covenant with God doesn't depend upon our ability to keep it. We would be utterly doomed if this covenant was up to us. There is, it turns out, nothing we can do to make God love us more or love us less.

Please don't interpret my remarks as giving license for our being careless or reckless with our lives. There are still consequences for our sin and Scripture bears this out again and again. But that said, God's covenant is not a three-strikes-and-you're-out sort of deal. The good news is that we get plenty of chances; hundreds of chances.

God keeps His promises. I want you to notice something else about God's promises in this story. God's promises are not instantaneous. When God reiterates the promise of an heir to Abraham, he is told to wait a while longer. The promise of land invites an ever longer delay. God tells Abraham in a

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- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

dream that it will take his descendants hundreds of years (400 to be exact) to take full possession of the land.

God keeps His promises, but sometimes you have to wait for them to come true. The problem of faith is one of waiting. We hate to wait. We have come to expect high speed internet, instant cash and microwave-ready meals.

Like Abraham, when God's promises are delayed, we have only two choices open to us. We can either wait for God's promises or take matters into our own hands. We saw last Sunday the mess Abraham gets into when he becomes impatient with waiting.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached an Advent sermon on Dec. 2, 1928 in which he said, "Waiting is an art which our impatient age has forgotten. We want to pluck the fruit before it has time to ripen." Later in his sermon, he returns to the same theme: "Learn to wait; for he promises to come. No one can wait for God who does not know that God has been waiting for us. How long has Christ been knocking at the door of our hearts?"

I like the way the author of Habakkuk expresses it: "If the promise of God seems slow; wait for it. It will surely come, it will not delay" (2:2-3).

God offers through Jesus Christ a new covenant. Let me take you back to the words

Jesus pronounces at the Last Supper: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Like the old covenant, Jesus takes the initiative and seals the new covenant in his blood.

If God's covenant is unilateral and unconditional, what is there left for us to do? We've come at last to the so-what portion of this sermon.

First, receive God's magnanimous offer of covenant through Jesus Christ. God offers this gift of salvation through Christ to those who receive it in faith. If you have not yet received this gift, what are you waiting for? Open your heart.

Second, seek, by the way we live our lives, to keep this covenant, knowing that we won't be able to maintain it by our efforts alone. If you need focus on what it means to keep the covenant, look no further than Jesus' two great commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36).

Third, be grateful. Live a life of gratitude. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic Meister Eckhardt said, "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'Thank you, God, thank you,' it will be sufficient."