

# Promises to Keep: We Are Most Like God When We Keep Our Promises

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## Abraham: The Promise Embraced by Faith

Texts: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6, 17-18; 17:1-10;  
Hebrews 11:8-9, 11, 17-19; Romans 4 and 6:1-4

Theme: In response to the gift of Christ, we respond in faith confirmed with the sign of baptism.

Introduction:

In the 42 year of history of Christ Church, we have been served by only two senior pastors. During this period there has never been a hint of financial malfeasance nor a betrayal of their marital vows. These two men have modeled the integrity of their ordination vows by being faithful shepherds of the flock.

A man and a woman stand before family and friends on their wedding day and take a vow. They say, **"I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband (wife)."** After 50 years of love and faithfulness you can see in their glowing faces the sweetness of their life union and a promise kept.

This same husband and wife are blessed with children. They stand before their congregation and offer these gifts to the Lord in baptism. They keep the promises they made in baptism by providing a canopy of protective care and take responsibility with the help of the community of faith to lead their children to faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Would that it was always like this! We are all too familiar with ours' and others' failure to keep promises. Thankfully, we have a God of grace who understands that we are transgressors in need of forgiveness and redemption.

And yet we ask...what is it that brings security and stability to a world that in almost every way seems out of control? Isn't it promise keeping? When we make and keep our promises we are saying, **"You can count on me. I will be there for you in every changing tomorrow."**

Our commitment to keep our promises is only a pale reflection of the God we serve who to His very core is a promise making and a promise keeping God. During the month of January I want us to examine God's relationship with us through the motif of covenant: The thread that unites the revelation of God to us and is the unifying theme of the Bible is that of the Old and New Covenant (Testament).

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What is a covenant? A covenant is a binding agreement between two or more parties that states the mutual commitments in the relationship. On a human level we read of the life and death pledge Jonathan made to David to protect from his jealous father, Saul. "Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:3). But the kind of covenant we will examine is not between equals. God, the Sovereign One, takes the initiative to reveal Himself and He alone determines the terms and conditions of the covenant. Biblically the covenant formula is, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." And the people respond by saying, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Exodus 19:8).

Yet lest we think that this covenant is like a King would conquer an enemy and then dictates the terms of surrender, we must see that with God covenant is motivated by love. In fact, there is a special word in the Old Testament language of Hebrew for the love of the covenant. It is the word *hesed*. Scholars have noted that the root of *hesed* is related to the word "womb", implying that the love of God is like the love of a mother for the fruit of her womb. Covenant love is enduring, steadfast, faithful love. My wife and I have just returned from a Christmas bonding visit to CA to be with granddaughter, Claire. Besides the pleasure of hearing our one year old say the endearing names of "Papa" and "Mimi", it has been a joy to watch my own daughter's delight in her child and the tender care offered and obvious bond that exists between mother and child. The union that forms in these moments will endure the trials and tests that a mother will inevitably face in the future, when this same innocent one tests the limits of a mother's love. It is a love that will not let the beloved go. It remains true regardless of the response of its object. This is the love of the covenant God.

My goals are twofold for this January series I have entitled "Promises To Keep":

1. I want us to grasp that our only sure and certain hope is a God who pledges his faithfulness to us in the form of covenant. He places his own reputation squarely on the line and swears by Himself, "I am your hedge against an uncertain future. Hold on to me through the rocky ride of life and know that I am the Only One who will never fail or forsake you. This is my covenant to you." We will bring this covenant love to life by looking at the dramatic stories of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and David, with whom God made covenants and then we will see how these were fulfilled in the New Covenant in Christ.

2. The second goal relates to our response to the covenant. God commits Himself to us and then calls forth a commitment in return. Lewis Smedes puts it like this, God is a promise maker and promise keeper, and "we are most like God when we keep our promises." What is it like to be a person who can be counted

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on to keep his or her promises? The wonder is that God believes that we are able to reflect His being by keeping our promises. We have “promises to keep” that are reflected in human vows of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, marriage, and discipleship. A redeemed person is a promise keeper.

So here is the outline we will follow each week:

1. Terms of the covenant: We will look at the purpose of God’s covenant claim upon Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and David
2. Promises to Keep: We will see the commitment that God calls forth from each of the covenant partners in response to His covenant making.
3. Sign and Seal of the covenant: Each covenant comes with a sign which is sealed in blood. God and his covenant partners must commit themselves to the covenant through an overt action and bear the sign of the covenant.
4. New Testament fulfillment: Finally each Old Testament covenant foreshadows the New Testament fulfillment that gives each of us a promise to keep. Remember: we are most like God when we keep our promises.

So let’s begin at the beginning with the formation of a people through the call of Abram.

## **I. The Covenant God Made with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 17:1-8)**

With these words, modern history begins, “The Lord God said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you’” (Gen. 12:1-2). This call to “leave” or “go” marks the beginning of an entirely different understanding of history that had been known up to this time, approximately 2000BC. Abram was called out of the Sumerian culture from a city called the Ur of the Chaldeans, located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This is known as Iraq today, located some 700 miles east of present day Israel. Up until this revelation of the Lord to Abram, the nature of life would be best summarized through the metaphor of a wheel. The wheel signifies repetition. Life goes in circles. There is nothing new, just repeatable cycles: you have the predictable pattern of the seasons: winter, spring, summer, fall; patterns of life: birth, life and death. There is nothing new to live for. No past, no future. Same ole’, same ole’. That is the way life was understood.

All of that changed when the Lord said, “Go”. Life now has a direction. History is now no longer a repetitious circle, but a journey with a destination. It is all under

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the guidance of God and heading toward a fulfillment which He will bring about. There is a past, present and future. Something new can happen.

The Lord said, **"Take Sarai and go."** Abraham might have thought, **"Kind of late in life, isn't it? Seventy five years old is sort of a late start."** **"Go where?"** **"Never mind, you will find out when you get there."** **"But why?"** **"Because I have chosen you to be the father of a new nation that will bless all the peoples in all the world."** This voice of the Lord is certainly something new for Abram. But somehow he recognizes it as a different voice than he had ever heard before and he knew that it was God who was speaking to him. To this point Abram was most likely a polytheist, who carried around his household gods or figurines of wood or precious metals, representing fertility, harvest, rain, etc. Satchel bags loaded on his beast of burden probably carried these hand carved deities on his journey. As the story unfolds will see how this God grows before Abram's eyes from a superior household deity to the Sovereign One who requires exclusive loyalty.

So Abram did as God had called him. But there is a problem. Even though God had said that through Abram would come a great nation, Abram has no descendants. Sarai is barren. She is ashamed that she has no heir to give to Abraham. We pick up the story again in Genesis 15. **"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'"** (Gen. 15:1) Small problem, Lord, **"You have given me no children. The only heir I have is a servant in my household"** (Gen. 15:3) The Lord promises, **"This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir...Look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them...so shall be your offspring."** (Gen. 15:4-5) Then these critical and defining words are said of Abram, **"Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him a righteousness"** (Genesis 15:6) He believed the possibility of the impossible. As we shall see, humanly speaking Abraham should not be able to have children. And it would only get more impossible as time went by.

Abram wanted assurance from God of his commitment to fulfill this promise. Abram asks, **"O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"** (Gen. 15:8) Then the Lord proceeded in dramatic fashion to commit Himself to the covenant to which He has pledged his faithfulness. The Lord instructed Abram to build two altars representing the two parties in the covenant: God and Abram. Cut in half a cow, goat and ram and place the halves on each altar. The very word covenant comes from the Hebrew for "cutting." They literally cut a covenant by carving up these animals. What follows is a drama that should set our heart ablaze. Abram fell into a deep sleep. **"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces"** (Gen. 15:17) This is a theophany: God manifested Himself

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in the form of a smoking pot with a flaming torch. The meaning of this drama is clear: As the Lord passed between the pieces on the altar, he was saying, "Abram, if I fail to keep my promise to you, may I be cut in two as these animals have been torn apart." God put his eternal being on the line. May my unchangeable deity be torn asunder if I break my promise! The writer of Hebrews says, "Because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself" (Hebrews 6:13).

This was God's seal in blood that He would fulfill his covenant. It is then followed by the cutting of circumcision as the sign to Abram and his descendants that they are the Lord's special people and willing parties to the covenant. In Genesis 17 Abraham has now reached the ripe age of 99, yet still without an heir. With each passing year, Abraham's biological options are running out. Yet the Lord restates His promise, while Abram falls facedown in obeisance before Him: "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be a father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram, your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations (Abraham literally means "father of many")...I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you will be circumcised" (Gen. 17:4,5,7,10). What is the significance of the sign of circumcision? It is simultaneously an act of providential grace that the Lord has marked out a people for himself, and it also embodies the promise the people make to be covenant partners. For the people are swearing their covenant allegiance to the Lord in circumcision, "May I be cut off from you, my Lord, from all your benefits and mercy, just as I have cut off the foreskin of my flesh, if I break this covenant." This covenant making is deadly serious business.

"I will be your God and you shall be my people." I will make you into a great nation and I will give you this land.

### II. Abraham's Response to the Covenant

But we still have a problem. Abraham has no heirs. By now Sarah is getting around only with the aid of her walker. In these twilight years romantic candlelight dinners are a thing of the past. Old age now simply heightens the theme that runs through God's covenant with Abraham: does he have the faith to embrace a promise that only the Lord can pull off? God promises only something that He can deliver. To have a child at this stage of life means that the Lord must bring something from nothing, life from death. Again this all foreshadows the way God works, ultimately signified in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

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Abraham is continuously tested in this belief. Will he continue to believe in the face of impossibility?

Genesis 18 records the humorous story of Abraham receiving three visitors near the great trees of Mamre. As the story unfolds we discover that one of the three visitors is the Lord Himself—an epiphany of sorts. In keeping with the Middle Eastern custom of hospitality, Abraham instructs Sarah to prepare a lavish meal for these royal guests. As the meal was being prepared the Lord inquires, **“Where is your wife Sarah?” (Gen. 18:9)** Abraham points to his tent. **“Then the Lord said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son’” (Gen. 18:10)**. Eavesdropping on this conversation, Sarah laughed to herself, because menopause had long since set in. Hers was the laughter of incredulity. What a cruel promise she thought to herself! Don't torture me with this false hope! Sarah has long since given up any possibility of having a child. But then the Lord said to Abraham, **“Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord?’” (Gen. 18:13-14)**

Then Genesis 21 records the fulfillment of the promise of an heir. At age 100 Abraham had a son they name fittingly Isaac, meaning **“He laughs”**. Sarah said, **“God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6)** What she thought was a cruel hoax, has become pure joy.

Then we might think, they are home free. The promise is at last fulfilled. Abraham has come to see that the Lord is true to his word. But no, there is one final test that is beyond comprehension. You will find this story in Genesis 22. **“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” (Genesis 22:1-2)** “What!”, we say incredulously. After all of this, Abraham is instructed to sacrifice this child of promise through whom all posterity will be blessed? This story raises more questions than we have time to answer...

But what can we say? This is the final test. Whom do you love and trust more? **“This son, your only son, who you love”** or the Sovereign Lord who fulfills His promises and makes covenant with you? What we can say is that as Abraham's understanding of God grew beyond his little Sumerian deities whom He controlled, he has grown to experience a God who is mysterious, beyond human intelligence who demands singular loyalty. All other gods are sorry human projections, only this God is worth his life, there is no other. Of course, the Lord rescues Abraham from sacrificing Isaac by providing a substitute as the very last

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instance as the knife was about to plunge into Isaac's heart. Because Abraham passed the test, the Lord renews his covenant commitment, "I swear by myself, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, as the sand on the seashore" (Genesis 22:16-17). The Hebrew people, God's people, have been born.

Before we turn to the New Covenant fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, let's remind ourselves of what we have learned:

1. God calls Abraham into covenant with Himself in order to create a chosen people with a promise of a special land.
2. Abraham enters the covenant with the Lord by faith which is tested to bring Abraham to place where the Lord supersedes all other loyalties.
3. The covenant is sealed through a blood sacrifice. The covenant is "cut" to which the Lord pledges the integrity of His character and into which he calls the people to "cut" a covenant through the circumcision of the flesh. This is the sign that they are marked as the people of the Lord through Abraham.

### The New Covenant Fulfillment

As we noted earlier, Abraham was called to set off on a journey that was to change the meaning of history. Abraham tells us that life is going somewhere. It has a direction and destination. This story would only be complete with the redemption of humanity fulfilled through the gift of God's one and only Son, whom he loved, Jesus Christ.

One of the values of tracing a theme such as covenant through the Bible is the wonder of seeing the Bible's unity. There is one continuous story because it is the same God revealing Himself and His patterns of relationship to His people over a 2000 year period.

The apostle Paul makes the linkages for us. In Romans 4 Paul puts forth Abraham as the Old Testament example that God has always justified human beings by faith alone rather than by works or through the keeping of the law. God has not changed his approach. Paul also sees that the New Covenant practice of baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of inclusion with the people of God. Paul makes this linkage directly in Colossians 2:11-12: "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised in the putting off the old nature, not with a circumcision done by hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." (Colossians 2:11-12)

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Using the image of baptism let's tease out the themes that we have already covered in God's covenant with Abraham as a way seeing the promises we are called to keep:

1. Baptism is the New Testament sign of **initiation** on the journey of following Jesus and inclusion with the special people of God. The journey begins with baptism. When Jesus commissioned his disciples, He said, "Go therefore and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19) Paul says, "For we were all baptized by one spirit into one body..." (I Cor. 12:13) In baptism we take the faith plunge as Abraham did and stake our life upon Jesus. Romans 4 opens this way: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:1-3)

The journey begins when we place our trust in Christ alone for our life and salvation. We start by taking that leap of faith into the arms of the Father as did Abraham. A Bahamian priest relates a story that captures the essence of biblical faith: "A two-story house caught on fire. The family was on their way out when the smallest boy tore from his mother's arms and ran back up stairs. Suddenly he appeared at a smoke-filled window crying like crazy. His father stood outside the window and shouted: 'Jump, son, jump! I'll catch you. The boy cried, 'But, daddy, I can't see you. 'I know,' the father called, 'I know. But I can see you."

The journey begins with a leap of faith into the father's arms signified in baptism.

2. Baptism marks our **identity** on the journey. Baptism tells us who we are. We are baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Romans 4:17 Paul says of Abraham, "As it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." (Romans 4:17) Baptism is the symbol of life over death. In baptism we are lowered under a watery grave having died to our old way of life and then rise from the waters of baptism to the freedom of a new life in Christ. The old has passed away and the new has come.

I love the story of the private who ran after and caught the runaway horse of Alexander the Great. When he brought the animal back to the general, Alexander thanked him by saying, "Thank you, captain." With one word the private was promoted. When the general said it, the private believed it. He went to the quartermaster, selected a new uniform and put it on. He embraced his new

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identity. Martin Luther used say that we he doubted his faith, wondered about his value to God, he would reassert, "I have been baptized."

3. Baptism is a sign of the **commitment** we need for the journey. There will be tests to our faith as we go. Again we see in Romans 4 this same theme asserted in Abraham's life, "With weakening his faith, he faced the fact that he was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what was promised." (Romans 4:19-21). This journey requires the obedience of faith. We are in it for the long haul.

I fear that baptism has lost much of its meaning in the church today. When parents present their children for baptism it can easily become just a family day. We dress up our kids; invite family and friends to church for a special moment and father for family photo opportunity, and then we go off to have celebration lunch together.

Baptism is a symbol of the highest commitment. When parents present their children for baptism, we are saying, "I give the gift of my son or daughter back to you, Lord, as Hannah gave Samuel. You have allowed me the opportunity to lead my child to a place of faith in Christ, and I commit myself with the help of the community of faith to do all that I can teach and model the Lordship of Christ before my children. This is my solemn vow." When adults are baptized, this should be a marker moment that says, "I am saying before the people of God that I am transferring ownership of my life. I am now under the management of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I recognize that my life is not by own and that I have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus. The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God."

In covenant God calls us into relationship with Himself. He has made a commitment to pursue us from the time of Abraham in approximately 2000BC culminating in the gift of His Son through whom we have access to the Father. He has thrown open the door so that we might be in covenant with Him as we place our trust in Christ alone as our north star. We are most like God when we keep our promises.