

Yes

Genesis 17:1-8 ~ Revelation 21:1-5

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 27, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I 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. ⁸And 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.” (Genesis 17:1-8, NRSV)

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Covenant. The passage from Genesis we just read is about covenant. Do you know that word? What is a covenant? Have you ever made a covenant or been in a covenant? We don't usually use that particular word these days. We prefer words like contract, or agreement, or promise. But that's what a covenant is; it's a solemn and binding agreement or promise between two or more parties.

There are two kinds of covenants. The first is an agreement between two parties meeting on equal terms. You're tired of mowing your lawn so you hire a kid down the street to do it for you. You make an agreement. He will mow your lawn once a week the way you want your lawn mowed, and you'll pay him the \$20 he is asking for doing so. Both sides can negotiate the terms. You can determine how and when you want your lawn mowed. He's free to accept your terms or not. He can set the price for the service. You're free to accept his terms or not.

The second kind of covenant is an agreement between two parties who do not meet on equal terms. A mother says to her daughter, “If you finish all your chores and homework on time without me nagging you along the way, then tonight you can watch that movie you've been wanting to watch.” In this scenario, negotiation can only happen if the parent, who is in authority over the child, is willing to negotiate. The young girl is simply not free to respond by saying, “Actually, mother, let me tell you how it's going to go. I'll do my homework but not my chores. And, furthermore, I'll be enjoying a bowl of ice cream with my movie tonight.” No. Not gonna happen. If she doesn't clean her room and finish her math she's not watching her movie. And ice cream is simply out of the question.

Now, in the Bible when we see the word ‘covenant’ it's usually that second kind of agreement, especially when the covenant is between God and his people as it is here in Genesis. As we just read, God makes a covenant with Abraham, a covenant in which God sets the terms. Here are the terms.

God will make Abraham's family into a great and prosperous nation. God will bless them, and protect them, and remain with them in a land he will give them. He will be their God and they will be his people, from generation to generation. In return, Abraham and those who come after him will “walk before God and be blameless.” In other words, the people will live in the ways God wants them to live. That's their part of the covenant. Later in the story, God spells out for his people through Moses exactly what this is to look like when he gives them the Ten Commandments. They will worship God alone and turn from any and all idols. They will rest on the Sabbath. They will not murder, or steal, or lie, or covet, or sleep with people to whom they are not married.

Put simply, this is the covenant sets out: God will love his people and the people will keep God's law. This was the covenant God made with Abraham that day and it was non-negotiable. Abraham could not suggest, “Lord, how about you love us but we walk blameless before you 50% of the time? Okay, how about 70%? 80%, that's my final offer!”

No, Abraham could either accept the covenant or reject the covenant. At least he knew the conditions beforehand. If he and his people are faithful to their part of the covenant then God would bless them, and prosper them, and protect them, and love them. If they are not, however, then they will be cut off from God and from the life that he alone can give. This, by the way, has always been the consequence of failing to keep God's law. In the very beginning, remember, God tells Adam and Eve that if they break his law and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they will surely die.¹ Keep the covenant and there is blessing, unity, peace, love and life. Break the covenant and there is the curse of separation, abandonment, isolation and death.

All this leads us to a very important question. I once heard it put this way by an Old Testament scholar named Ray Dillard: "Is God's part of the covenant conditional or unconditional?"² Remember, God's part is love and our part is law. Well, if we don't keep the law, our part, does God still have to keep his part and love us? If the answer is yes, then God's love is unconditional. He will love no matter what. If the answer is no, then God's love is conditional. He will only love us if we do what is right.

And right away you all think it's an easy answer. Of course, you say, God's love is unconditional. That's what we've all been taught since we were little kids in Sunday school. God loves no matter what! Right? And yet anybody who reads through the Bible, especially the Old Testament, quickly discovers that it's not such an easy answer. As you may know, Abraham and his descendants continually failed to keep God's law, sometimes in horribly defiant ways. In response, all through the Old Testament we hear God making statements like this one in Isaiah, "**The earth is polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty.**"³ So there's our answer. God's covenant is conditional. He only blesses those who keep his law. Right?

Here's the problem. As willfully disobedient as his people continue to be, God never seems to be able to fully release himself from keeping his end of the deal. God is never quite willing to completely abandon his people. In fact, later in the very same book of Isaiah, God says this to his people, "**Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.**"⁴ One moment God swears the sin of his people has broken the covenant. Then the very next moment God pledges His unconditional faithfulness to that same covenant. And this is the tension that drives the whole story forward as we wonder how it will be resolved. God's people have not kept the law; will God continue to love?

Again, we want to resolve this question quickly. Of course God will love. God always loves no matter what. People sin, yes, but God can just forgive sin. Right? Sometimes people even wonder why Jesus had to die on the cross. Did God's Son really have to go through all that? Couldn't God just have chosen to forgive us and move on? No, God could not. And the reason is that whenever there is sin, when somebody does harm to another, there is always a debt that has to be paid. Always.

Simple example. Let's say you borrow my golf club, my favorite golf club, my very expensive golf club that I finally saved up enough for to buy this season. It's a prized possession of mine but I loan it to you because you're my friend. But then out of carelessness you leave my golf club on the 16th hole and by the time you realize your mistake and race back to get it, it's gone. Now, all at once there is a debt that needs to be absorbed. Of course, you can absorb that debt yourself by going out and buying me a new club. But maybe you don't have the money. Or maybe you're not willing because you claim it wasn't your fault but the fault of person who took what didn't belong to them. So now since you won't absorb the debt I have to absorb it. Right? Which means that either I'm out one golf club or out the money it will cost me to buy a new one. And even if I forgive you for your carelessness, the debt is still there. You see, the one thing I simply cannot do is to just say I forgive you and pretend all is as it was before.

Here's a more serious example. Two people enter into the covenant of marriage, each one promising to love the other for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, till death do we part. Each one says to the other that my

¹ Genesis 2:16-17 – "And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'"

² Cited by Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 72.

³ Isaiah 24:5-6

⁴ Isaiah 49:15-16

heart, my affection, my devotion, my life belong to you alone. But then at some point along the way the husband decides to give his heart, his affection, his devotion, his body to another woman. All at once the covenant is broken. A debt now exists, an enormous debt which is going to have to be paid by somebody. Now, maybe the husband pays the debt as the wife does everything in her power for the rest of her life to make his life miserable. That happens sometimes, though in the end revenge never really sets anybody free. So instead, maybe the wife chooses to forgive her unfaithful husband. Maybe he even repents and comes back and begs for forgiveness. Yet even then, if she forgives him can you see that in doing so the debt isn't just wiped away? Even as she forgives, when such a thing is possible, she will absorb a great debt as she endures tremendous heartache and pain. Whenever a covenant is broken, whenever harm is done to one by another, the damage and debt always must be borne by somebody. It can never just be imagined away.

Therefore, if we, as imperfect and fallible as we are, can never just brush aside harm done to us, how in the world could we ever imagine that God, whose holiness and righteousness and demand for justice are so much higher than our own, how could we ever imagine that he could just brush sin aside? When we turn against God, reject his ways for our own ways, seek our security and identity in things other than him, take his gifts and blessings and use them in selfish pursuits, even ignore him altogether, when we do this there is a debt produced which simply cannot be ignored. Therefore, because God is holy, and just, and righteous, and is these things beyond measure, God's covenant must be conditional. It must be. The debt must be paid. If we don't keep the law we cannot expect to receive God's love and blessing.

And now I hope you feel the tension. Doesn't God love us no matter what? Isn't that what the Bible teaches us? Yes, I get it, God is justified in cutting us off but God never does. Right? If God's covenant is conditional, why does God ceaselessly persist with his people in spite of their continual rejection and rebellion?

There's a marvelous story buried in the middle of the Old Testament about a man named Hosea. Hosea was a prophet, a righteous man among God's people. But one day God tells him to marry a woman named Gomer whose reputation was, shall we say, less than virtuous. Nonetheless, Hosea obeys God and takes Gomer as his bride. Early on in the marriage, however, Gomer begins to sneak out at night after Hosea is asleep and go into the city to sell herself to men she's never met. Hosea is both furious and heartbroken. Each time he discovers that Gomer has gone out to betray him he locks the door and swears that she is no longer welcome home. But then every morning when Gomer stumbles home, he ends up letting her back in.

Well, one morning she doesn't come home at all. Hosea tells himself it's for the best, that he'll be better off without her. But he doesn't mean it. And before you know it he's was out in the streets desperately searching for his wife. When he finds Gomer she's lying in a gutter, abused and left for dead by those who cared nothing for her. Hosea takes her in his arms and brings her home. But even as he nurses her back to health he knows that when she gets the chance, she'll likely leave him again.

The biblical writer makes clear that this story of Hosea and Gomer is really a story of God and his people. Hosea is God. We are Gomer. Over and over we betray his love and yet his love endures. How can it not? God is love, you see, and so God's covenant, like his love, is unconditional. No matter what we do, God will always keep his side of the deal.

So how does this get worked out? On one hand, a holy and righteous God simply cannot excuse our sin – the debt must be paid! On the other hand, God simply cannot deny his love. We break our part of the covenant. None of us walks blameless in God's sight. God loves but we fail to keep his law. So what is the result? Will God honor love or law? Is God a God of justice or a God of mercy? Either God is holy and just or God is compassionate and merciful. Something has to give. Is God's covenant conditional or is God's covenant unconditional?

Yes. Yes is the astonishing answer of the Gospel. In Christ we see that God's covenant is conditional and unconditional all at once. You see, both the love and the law of God were fully satisfied when Jesus, his only Son, came to earth and took on the frailty of human form, divinity making its home in human flesh, and then, though he walked blameless before God, he willingly went to the cross to suffer and die on behalf of those who have not.

At the cross, you see, the law of God is fully satisfied. At the cross God's covenant remains conditional. The debt of sin is not brushed aside but paid in full by the only one who could take such a great debt upon himself, a debt which was nothing less than the enormity of human sin of all people for all time. As Paul writes in Colossians, **“When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of**

our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.⁵ On our behalf, God keeps the conditions of our end of the covenant. Our sin must result in abandonment and death but God takes that debt upon himself.

A theologian named John Stott puts it this way, “The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God puts himself where only we deserve to be.”⁶ At the cross the law of God is fully satisfied. The covenant remains conditional. Our part, through Christ, is fulfilled.

At the very same time, however, at the cross the love of God is also satisfied. God’s part of the covenant remains unconditional. God’s part, through Christ, is also fulfilled. In spite of our unfaithfulness, God is faithful, willing to offer the greatest sacrifice, his very life, that we would live. As Jesus himself once famously declared, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.”**⁷

Friends this is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which I declare to you this Easter morning! If you receive this good news in faith then all that God has promised is yours: blessing, protection, favor, provision, joy, peace, unity, life, love. In Jesus Christ, God’s Son, God has satisfied both parts of the covenant, our part as well as his. As a writer named Tim Keller puts it, “We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”

This is God’s *new* covenant. That’s the language we use sometimes in the church because that’s the language the New Testament often uses. The covenant is new, but it’s still that second kind of covenant. It’s not a covenant between equal parties. It’s not a covenant that can be negotiated. The God of the universe, our holy and loving Creator, makes this covenant with us, his creation. His love and life and forgiveness and blessing are ours. All we must do is believe in faith. We must first believe that God is rightly just in his condemnation of our sin, that we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe. But then we must also believe that even so, in Christ we are more loved and accepted and forgiven than we ever dared hope.

Many of us here this morning have believed in this message and have since entered into a life that we never before imagined possible. For you see, Jesus not only died on the cross but, three days later, rose from the dead. He is alive, and among us! As he promised, by his Spirit Jesus is at work renewing all things in creation. And one day he will come back and finally and forever set all things right. Easter was just the beginning.

You see, in the resurrection the law of God continues to be satisfied each and every day. Even as we so often continue to fail to keep our part of the deal, God’s grace through Christ remains sufficient. So when that wickedly deceitful voice whispers in your ear telling you that you have not been good enough to receive God’s favor in your life, the Spirit of Christ drowns it out with the truth that because of Christ’s sacrifice God’s favor is always yours if you receive it in faith. Furthermore, the Spirit of Christ empowers and enables us to actually begin to walk blameless before God in ways we never before could do on our own power.

In the resurrection the love of God is also satisfied each and every day. We can begin and end each day hearing God say to us, “You are my beloved Son. You are my beloved daughter. I delight in your life.” The Spirit of the resurrected Christ reminds us continuously that there is nothing in all creation – not even sin or death – that can ever separate us from the love of God.

It’s always captivated me that the Bible ends as it begins. This is our hope. The resurrected Christ will come again someday, maybe someday soon. And in that day we will see the final and lasting fulfillment of the covenant. In the next to last chapter of the Bible we are given a stunningly beautiful picture of that day. John writes,

⁵ Colossians 2:13-14

⁶ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer’s Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 160.

⁷ John 3:16-17

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Through the risen Christ there will come a day when all who have faith will see God’s covenant fulfilled. At last we will dwell with God. He will be our God and we will be his people and nothing will come between us ever again. Blessing, favor, joy, peace, love and life will be ours. And by grace we will at last walk forever blameless before the One who has made all this possible.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Genesis 17:1-8. What do you notice here?
2. Is this an odd choice of scripture readings for Easter? What, if anything, does this text have to do with Jesus’ resurrection?
3. How would you describe or define the covenant that God has made with his people? What sort of agreement does God actually have with us?
4. God promises to love us. That’s his part of the covenant. Our part is to keep the law (“to walk blameless before him”). So what if we don’t keep our part? Is God’s part of the covenant conditional or unconditional?
5. Why doesn’t God just decide to forgive us and set aside our sin? Wouldn’t that have been easier than having Jesus die?
6. Theologian John Stott writes, ““The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God puts himself where only we deserve to be.” What does this mean? Do you agree?
7. Paul writes in II Corinthians 1:20, “For in Christ every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’.” What does this mean? What does this have to do with Easter?
8. After considering this message, how has the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ taken on new or deeper meaning for you?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How are things different because Jesus died on the cross?
How are things different because Jesus rose from the dead?