

# "Testament = Covenant = A Loving Partnership"

## Genesis Series: "Decisive Moments"

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### Genesis 17:1-8

*When 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. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,*

*"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 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. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.*

*"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. 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."*

This morning's brief message is a teaching sermon. I want us to learn about a theme that is very important in the Book of Genesis and in our faith as a whole. It's very simple. It's this: *A Testament = A Covenant = A Loving Partnership*. I want us to know about God's Covenant. But I want us to know about it not just in an intellectual way, but more in a deeply personal way. I want you to know about God's Covenant in the same way that you know that the air you're breathing is sustaining you and the pew you're sitting on is upholding you. There's a "knowing" that is existential and experiential. It involves conviction as well and a decision – in this case a decision to say, *"Here I stand, under the Covenant of God. This is how I shall strive to live my life – in a Covenant Partnership with God.*

*"Testament = Covenant = A Loving Partnership"* is at the heart of the matter when it comes to our faith. Because God is a Covenant Maker. The Bible is a book about God's Covenants - so much so that they divided the entire into two basic Covenants. The Old Covenant & the New

Covenant. The Old Testament & the New Testament. The Older Loving Partnership & the Newer Loving Partnership.

For years I used to contrast the old and the new covenants by saying that the Old Covenant was based upon the laws of God and the New Testament was based upon the grace of God in Christ. This contrast was not only overly simplified it also turns out to be incorrect. I discovered I was wrong by actually reading the texts themselves where God makes these covenants. There's a wonderful consistency of unconditional love and grace in the various covenants of scripture. It wasn't that the Old Covenant was bad & the new was good. The Old Covenant was beautiful as we'll see. It nurtured a Loving Partnership between God & Humanity and gave us such spiritual heroes as Abraham & Sarah, Moses & Miriam, King David & Isaiah, and the Old Covenant gave us Jesus of Nazareth, as a continuation of the Old, a fulfillment of it, not a negating of it.

**The First Covenant in the Bible is part of one of the most famous stories in all the Bible - the Covenant with Noah.** After the great flood had ended God spoke these words to Noah.

*Gen. 9:9 - "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you . . . I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth . . . . This is the sign - I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."*

The Rainbow is called here God's bow - as in bow & arrow. *"I will set my bow in the clouds."* In other words God says, *"I am laying down my weapon.*

*There will now be peace between us."*

*"My bow in the clouds is an everlasting covenant between me and you."*

That's the Covenant God made with Noah. It was an unconditional, peace-making covenant.

## **II. The next Covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Covenant with Abraham.**

It's stated several times to Abraham.

*Gen. 17:6 - "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. 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."*

This Covenant is very similar to the one made with Noah. It's an everlasting covenant. It's not just for Abraham, it's for his offspring as well. What's added is this very personal touch - *"I will be your God."* It's a statement of loyalty and commitment.

The Covenant with Abraham also has a difficult aspect to it, one that has caused centuries of turmoil. It was a promise by God that came with some real estate - the Promised Land.

*Gen. 17 - "I will give you the land of Canaan."*

*Gen. 12: 7 - "To your offspring I will give this land."*

This is why conservative Christians, who tend to take more parts of the Bible literally, are

staunchly loyal to Israel. God gave them that land & stated it several times in the Bible.

Other Christians point out Genesis 12:3 where God says, *"I will bless you and through you all the nations of the world shall be blessed."* They were blessed to be a blessing to others. God's blessing to them was meant to be shared with others, and one would think that the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, etc. and all those who followed them in that region would be included in the sharing of the blessing. In fact, the Covenant with Noah which preceded the Covenant with Abraham was a Covenant with all people, not just the Hebrews. These two other passages are needed to add balance to the promise of the land & perhaps sharing it. But what I'd most like you to remember is that God once again makes a personal, everlasting and unconditional covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

### **III. Well, the Covenant is affirmed and passed down from generation to generation – from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. Then one day on top of Mnt. Horeb, God reaffirmed the covenant with a man named Moses.**

Exodus 6 - *"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,"* says the Lord.  
*"I established my covenant with them."  
"I will redeem you from the slavery of the Egyptians,  
"I will take you as my people. I will be your God."  
"The Lord told this to Moses."*

In Deut. 29, just before the Israelites are to enter the Promised Land, God reminds them of God's Covenant with them. *"I am making this covenant with you"* - the same promises I made to Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. And Moses says, *"Enter into the Covenant of the Lord, that he may be your God and we shall be his people."*

There is one thing that is added to the Covenant through God's encounter with Moses. Moses is given instructions on how the Israelites are to live as God's Covenant partners. We find these most clearly in the 10 Commandments. (Remember the name for the holy box that the Israelites carried around containing the tablets of the 10 Commandments? They called it the "Ark of the Covenant.") Ancient Jews called this part of scripture - *"The Book of the Covenant"* - as God had said, *"You are to be holy as I am to be holy. I want my Covenant Partners to be like me, and here's how you do it - You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not worship any man-made thing. Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Honor the sabbath."* - and so on. *"Here's how I want my Covenant Partners to live – I want them to live in such a way that they reflect their partnership with me, says the Lord."* This doesn't mean that God's covenant is conditional - do this and I'll love you. It just means that like a loving parent God has not only unconditional love for God's children, but God also has expectations for how God's children are to live, as people who are in a loving partnership with God.

So, we have Covenants made to and through Noah, Abraham & Moses.

**IV. God's Covenant was also reaffirmed to David,** Israel's greatest king and their spiritual leader, writer of half the psalms, half of their prayer book and hymnal. Some of David's last words are recorded in II Samuel 23 - *"Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant."* He wrote about this in Psalm 89 - *"God said, 'I have made a*

*covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David, I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations."*

One thing that is added to the Covenant with David is the promise that a Messiah will come for the Jews and for all people through the line of David. The prophet Isaiah and others told that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David.

**V. This of course leads us up to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all God's promises, all God's covenants, and ushers us into a New Covenant that he has made through his very life, death & resurrection.** This is why it was so powerful for Jesus' disciples, who were all Jewish, when Jesus says, *"I am making a New Covenant with you in my blood which is shed for your forgiveness."* The Messiah himself is the New Covenant. Hebrews 9:15 - *"Christ is the mediator of a New Covenant."* - A Loving Partnership based on his sacrificial love.

Well, you just received a Biblical overview of the major Covenants in the Scriptures. This is a big part of *Old Testament 101*. Here's what I'd like you to remember.

**A - God initiates the Covenants.** Not us. The Covenant is God's work, not ours.

Illustration. I can not go to Bill Gates and say, *"Bill, I'm willing to switch from my Mac to a PC, if you supply with everything I'll need for free."* I'm in no position to do that. It would only be by the "Grace of Gates" that I could pull that off. In the same way, I'm in no position to demand a loving partnership with the Creator of the World. It's only by the grace of God. And by the grace of God our Creator happens to be a Covenant Maker and longs to be in a loving partnership with each one of us. God is the initiator of all of the Covenants. They are acts of grace and unconditional love. And that's good news for us.

**B - If a Covenant is a Loving Partnership than that says something the quality of the relationship God wants with each one of us.** It's not one of Master/Slave or King/Servant, but more like a beautiful, long lasting, mutually edifying marriage. We talked about that beautiful Hebrew word "Ezer" used in Gen. 2: *"It is not good for man to be alone, I will make for his a partner (an Ezer) for him."* The word is used 17 other times in the Hebrew scriptures - all 17 times it refers to God as the Ezer of Israel - the Loving Partner of the Israelites. God wants to be our beloved. (Hosea & Gomer) Think of the phrase - "the Covenant of Marriage." God's wants to be in a personal intimate loving partnership with each one of us.

**C - Jesus Christ himself is the New Covenant.**

Illustration. A traveler was getting a tour of the jungle. The guide went ahead of him with a machete in hand. The tourist cried out - *"Where's the path? Why aren't you taking us on a path?"* The guide replied - *"I am the path."*

Christ is the path to God for us. He is the New Covenant that ushers us so beautifully, so gracefully into this loving relationship with our God, the God he so clearly revealed and embodied. Christ is the New Covenant. And with that we are ready for communion - to receive once again the New Covenant who is Jesus Christ himself. Amen.