

# Me & You & the Abrahamic Covenant

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The overall, overarching theme of Lent this year is “covenant”. And today’s lectionary scriptures focus on God’s covenant with Abraham, and Paul’s interpretation of it in Romans 4.

## Unilateral and Bilateral Covenants

There are many characteristics to covenants, but I will limit myself to one for the purpose of today’s meditation: Biblical covenants can be unilateral (one-way) or bilateral (two-way). For example, the covenant with Noah was unilateral. After the Flood, God promised humanity that He would never again destroy all life on earth with a Flood; there was no counterpart from Noah (symbolizing humanity). Whereas the covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai, for example, was bilateral. Both God and the human party (Israel) promise to do something: God promises to bless Israel, and Israel promises to obey the law given by Moses. One-way covenants are usually unconditional and are called “grace covenants”, whereas two-way covenants are usually conditional and are called “works covenants”.

## Covenant between God and Abraham (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16)

With this in mind, we now come to our first scripture for today, which is the covenant in Genesis 17 (actually, the Abrahamic covenant is spelled out over time from chapters 12 to 22). In this covenant, God promised many things to Abraham:

- That He would make Abraham’s name great (Genesis 12:2);
- That Abraham would become the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:4-5); and
- That he and his offspring would be given “land” (Genesis 13:15; 15:18; 17:8)

Also, the covenant extends from generation to generation. This is initially understood as the physical descendants of Abraham. But the apostle Paul puts a different twist on it.

## Paul’s Interpretation (Romans 4:13-25)

In Romans 4, Paul explains that God’s promise is realized through faith:

*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law<sup>1</sup> but through the righteousness of faith.*

*For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Romans 4:13, 16-17)*

So, not just the physical descendants of Abraham, as the Jews in Paul’s time believed. Paul was writing to the church in Rome which, as we understand it, included both Jews and Gentiles. So both groups could have thought that this promise only applied to the Jews. But the Romans text declares Abraham the father of all of us who share in Abraham’s faith. God’s New Covenant is radically inclusive. And, through faith, anyone can find themselves a son or daughter of Abraham, the “father of many nations”. So the promise extending from generations to generations can no longer be understood in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Here, Paul is referring to another covenant, the one with Israel through Moses, which came some 400 years later.

genetic lineage.

But what is that promise?

### **The Sermon on the Mount**

We have seen that Paul mentions the promise of “inheriting the world”. And, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says: “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*” (Matthew 5:5), he is also referring to that promise made to Abraham. So, basically, “inheriting the world” (in Paul’s words) or “inheriting the earth” (in Jesus’ words) should be understood, in New Covenant terms, as “entering God’s Kingdom”<sup>2</sup>.

Richard Rohr says that “the Sermon on the Mount is the very blueprint for Christian lifestyle” and that “Jesus taught an alternative wisdom – the Reign of God – which overturns the conventional and common trust in power, possessions, and personal prestige<sup>3</sup>”. It is interesting to note that the three things that Richard Rohr says were overturned by the Kingdom of God are three of the things that were promised to Abraham:

- Personal prestige: Abraham’s name would be “made great”
- Possessions: Abraham and his descendants were promised a “land”
- Power: Abraham would become the father of a “multitude of nations”

In the same vein, it is also interesting to note that Jesus starts his Sermon on the Mount by saying: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:3). The Greek word translated as “poor in spirit” is *ptochoi*, which means:

- reduced to poverty, deprived of wealth, poor, needy – in other words, without possessions;
- without help, deprived of influence – in other words, without power; and
- deprived of position, of honour – in other words, without personal prestige.

And Jesus is saying: “Blessed are you” because you don’t have any possessions, power or prestige. But what you do have is... the Kingdom of God! So, even though in Romans 4, Paul makes a parallel between the New Covenant and the one made with Abraham, we can see here a major difference: the New Covenant does not involve physical possessions or blessings – notwithstanding the “Health and Wealth Gospel” or “Prosperity Gospel”.

The proponents of that belief assert that health and wealth are always the will of God for Christians, provided you have enough faith and give generously to their organization or church. The “Health and Wealth Gospel” is based on (among other things) an incorrect understanding of the Abrahamic covenant as a means to material entitlement<sup>4</sup>. I’m not saying we will not receive physical blessings from God. But as far as I can see, it is not part of a covenantal promise to which we are entitled. Actually, a few verses later, the New Covenant blessings involve... persecutions:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:10-11)*

So much for power, possessions, and personal prestige! So it seems any physical blessings we receive are out of God’s gracious love.

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<sup>2</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1444, note 5:3.

<sup>3</sup> <https://cac.org/blessed-poor-spirit-2018-01-30/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-errors-of-the-prosperity-gospel/>

## Grace

Now, why would there be such a difference between the New Covenant and God's original covenantal promise to Abraham – and, as a matter of fact, all the preceding covenants. Again, I turn to Richard Rohr<sup>5</sup>. He says that our human ego cannot imagine God's infinite and gracious love and that, as a result, we spend more time fearing and trying to control God than actually loving Him. And why is that? Because God has all the power (as can be clearly seen under the old covenants), whereas “love requires some capacity for equality and mutuality”. So what God did was to “empty himself” and become human. As Paul explains it, “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*” (Philippians 2:5-7)

Or, as Rohr puts it, “God becoming powerless in Jesus” and, therefore, allowing us to truly love Him rather than fear Him and trying to control Him to get our way – and also setting us an example (Philippians 2:1-4). Rohr then brings up the notion of covenant, and points out the evolution in the string of Biblical covenants: “yet, in the biblical stories (and in our own lives), God leads people beyond the idea of a bilateral contract in which we must earn, deserve, and merit (which we never live up to!), to an experience of pure, unearned grace – an entirely unilateral “new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31 and Luke 22:20) initiated and maintained from God's side.”

So, Rohr concludes, “only a radical experience of grace can move us beyond the self-defeating and tired story line of reward and punishment, in which almost all lose. Only a deeply personal experience of unearned love can move us beyond a worldview of arbitrary requirements to a worldview of abundance and availability.”

## Conclusion

To recapitulate:

- God made some promises to Abraham;
- Paul explains that the promise applies not only to Abraham's lineage, but to all who share Abraham's faith;
- Jesus indicates that, under the New Covenant, we should understand that promise in “spiritual” terms; and
- Richard Rohr suggests that the evolution of Biblical covenants culminates in a New Covenant that is meant for us to experience God's infinite and gracious love.

So it's in this perspective that we should probably understand the covenant made with Abraham:

- Moving from physical blessings to (mostly) spiritual blessings; and
- Moving from blessings as a reward in the context of a two-way promise to blessings based on God's gracious, unearned love.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://cac.org/god-is-merciful-and-gracious-2018-01-22/>