

Contracts or Covenants?

Genesis 28:10-22

If. That's what Jacob said. If God will be with me. If God will protect me. If God will give me food to eat and garments to wear. If God will bring me safely back home. Then, and only then, only after God showers all kinds of blessings on me, then I will worship Him. And then I will only give Him back a tenth of everything that He has given me.

That's what Jacob said, isn't it? But that's not the language of worship. That's not the language of confident trust. No, such "if-then" statements are the language of contract: if you pay me this amount, I will sell you that item. And let's face it: we don't make contracts with those we trust implicitly – a handshake is all we ask from our close friends. No, we only make contracts with those we're not sure about, those who might not follow through on their promises to us.

In contrast, we make covenants with those we love and trust completely. For example, a bride and groom don't use "if-then" language when they marry one another. No, the groom says, "I take you to be my wife," and the bride says, "I take you to be my husband." In fact, the traditional wedding vows make it clear that these promises are unconditional: "For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, in other words, no matter what may happen to us, I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live." Yes, a wedding, like all other covenants, is a mutual exchange of unconditional promises.

And that's the sort of promise that God had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham and to his father Isaac. God had told each of them that he would multiply their seed, giving them many descendants. And God had said that their descendants would possess the land God promised to give them.

And God had made no conditions on these promises. In fact, at the time God made His covenant with Abraham, God had rendered him completely helpless, unable to participate in the customary ceremony. But God still took the blood oath upon Himself, promising that He would die if He broke His word. And of course we know God can't die, right?

Well, the same God made the same unconditional promises to Jacob: "I will give the land on which you lie to you and to your seed. And Your seed shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south." So, why does Jacob respond to such a generous covenant with hesitant, merely contractual language?

Well, it's not because he doubted that God really spoke to him in that dream. After all, in verse 16, he quickly came to the conclusion that the Lord was right there with him. In fact, he even called the place Bethel, which means, "House of God." No, Jacob knew good and well Who was talking to him.

And it wasn't because he thought that God somehow didn't have the power to keep the promises He had made. No, verse 17 clearly says that Jacob was afraid – and we aren't afraid of powerless people, are we? So, why did Jacob insist on making a contract with God instead of simply accepting His covenant promises, the way his father and grandfather had done?

Well, we might jump to the conclusion that Jacob just didn't think God's promises were worth very much. After all, at the time Abraham died in chapter 25, he only had one legitimate son, Isaac. And

Isaac only had two sons, Esau and Jacob. So, where was the multitude of descendants God had promised each of them? And to make matters worse, neither Abraham nor Isaac ever possessed the land God had said would belong to their descendants. No, all their lives both of them were sojourners, wanderers in a land possessed by unbelieving people like the Canaanites. A well here, a burial plot there – that's all either of them could see of the grand promises God had made to them.

And maybe you're having a hard time trusting God for the same reason. Oh, we all know Who He is. We all confess every week that He is the almighty maker of heaven and earth. We know He has the power to do anything He wants.

But when sickness or grief comes our way, when we worry about how we are going to make ends meet, when discouragement and despair replace the peace and joy we all want so desperately, well, maybe we start to wonder if God is really willing to keep those promises that He has made. Maybe we start to think God's promises just aren't worth very much.

But however understandable such a conclusion may be, that couldn't have been Jacob's problem. For if he really didn't have confidence that God would keep His promises, why would Jacob have gone to all the trouble of convincing his twin brother Esau to sell him his birthright, an inheritance that principally consisted of those very same promises? And why would Jacob and his mother Rebekah have cooked up their elaborate scheme to steal Isaac's blessing, a blessing which echoed those same promises? If Jacob didn't think God would keep His word, then why did Jacob pretend to be Esau so that his blind father would bless him with the same promises that God had just repeated to him in his dream? No, there can be no doubt that Jacob desperately wanted the blessings God had promised his father and grandfather.

So, why did Jacob insist on making a contract instead of a covenant with God? Maybe it wasn't because he doubted God's power or faithfulness. Maybe he just couldn't believe that God would stick with him because of the sin, the selfishness in his own heart. Perhaps because of everything he had done, he just couldn't believe that God would love him enough to be faithful to him.

For why was Jacob camping out at Bethel with a stone at his head instead of going to sleep, safe and warm at his family fireside? Because his selfish scheming had torn his family apart. For not only had Jacob taken advantage of his blind father. Not only had he turned his mother into a co-conspirator against her husband. He had also made an implacable enemy out of his own twin brother. In fact, Esau was determined to murder Jacob – even though he had decided to bide his time, waiting until their father was dead before doing the deed. That's why Rebekah told Jacob he would have to leave home, going as far as Haran to stay with his uncle Laban.

So yes, Jacob had finally gotten everything he had always wanted – the promise of God's blessing. And God had even repeated that very same blessing in one of Jacob's dreams. But because of all the terrible things he had done to gain that blessing, perhaps Jacob couldn't believe that God could love him enough to keep all those promises. Perhaps Jacob expected God to abandon him in the same way that he had been forced to flee from his own family.

And maybe that's where you are today. Maybe, as you look back not just over the last year but over all of your life, you have also made some big mistakes. Maybe you think about the time or money you have wasted, or the opportunities you let slip by, or the relationships you have allowed to languish –

don't we all regret things that we should have done but didn't? And then there are those things we did last year that we are truly ashamed of: the unkind, cutting remarks, the deceptions, the temptations that were embraced instead of rejected, the selfish decisions that harmed and alienated even those who were closest to us.

And how faithful have any of us really been to God? Have we really trusted in His promises any more than Jacob did? Have we truly loved Him, or have we just wanted to wheedle blessings out of Him? No, why should any of us imagine that God would want to keep any of His promises to us?

Well, what did Paul tell us in our responsive reading this morning? For remember, Paul was an even bigger sinner than Jacob was. Yes, Jacob may have been a selfish liar and a conniving cheat, but Paul had been a persecutor of the Church, actively participating in the imprisonment and even the death of those who believe in Christ. In fact, at the end of his life, Paul told Timothy that he was the foremost of all sinners (I Timothy 1:15).

And yet Paul also told Timothy that the very reason Christ had come into the world was to save sinners like him. And Paul said the same thing in chapter five of his letter to the Romans: Christ died not for the righteous, but for the ungodly. Yes, Paul insists that it was while we were still helpless in our sins, still actively in rebellion against God that Christ died for us. This, he says, is the greatest proof of God's unconditional, self-sacrificial, covenant-keeping love.

And God showed Jacob the same kind of love, didn't He? For it was after Jacob's selfish scheming had wrecked his family, it was while he was on the run from his own brother's murderous hatred that the Lord appeared to him in a dream. And in that dream, God confirmed the blessing that Isaac had bestowed on him, repeating to Jacob the same unconditional promises that the Lord had made to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, there could be no doubt that God would give lying, scheming, selfish Jacob the exact blessing that Jacob had tried to gain through such treacherous means.

But God insisted that these blessings wouldn't just be for Jacob's descendants in some faraway future. For God said, "I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land." God even went so far as to make a solemn promise to conniving, cheating Jacob: "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Now, making those kinds of unconditional promises to someone who is so obviously undeserving is the very definition of grace.

And of course we know that God makes the same promises to all those who trust in Christ. For we know that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of all those promises. Yes, Jesus is the seed of Jacob, the seed of Abraham, the One in Whom all the families of the earth are blessed. And we know that God is indeed with us always, pouring out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit He has given to sinners just like us. Yes, we know that because of the death and resurrection of Christ, God's blessings are for sinners just like Paul, sinners just like Jacob, sinners just like us.

So, will we go on doubting God's promises? Will we go on trying to buy His favor with our gifts or good deeds? Will we love Him only as far as He gives us what we want? Or will we rest in His unmerited favor, trusting completely in His unconditional love, satisfied with His amazing grace?