

What A Country! What A Covenant!

After an extremely long day yesterday, or maybe that was a couple of days all strung together, we finally arrived home from Israel about midnight last night. After thirty some hours of being up and awake, we got to our house around 1:00 am and after unpacking a few things, I headed to the study to try to put these thoughts in some kind of order.

I had actually taken a few moments one afternoon at the Sea of Galilee to write a few thoughts down that I felt the Holy Spirit speaking to me. I shared some of these Scriptures with the group at the Garden Tomb on Thursday and I felt I was to share with you this morning as we prepare our hearts to celebrate communion.

Some of you may have gone to see the comedian in Branson named Yakoff Smirnov. I have never seen him in person, but I remember early on in his career seeing him on television as he talked about coming to America from the former Soviet Union. His often repeated catch phrase was, “What a country!” That’s what I think each trip to Israel and to see what the Lord has done in that place. What a country. It’s not just the beauty of the area around the Galilee or the ancient splendor of the Old City of Jerusalem, it is the reminder everywhere you look of the faithfulness of God to his people, to a covenant, to a man. What a country, but what a covenant. The country is only there because of a covenant.

Turn with me to Genesis 12 as I share some very simple thoughts with you this morning. I’m going to be reading from a slightly different translation this morning - the New Revised Standard Version. Genesis 12 tells of the call of a man named Abram, a man who would be called Abraham, the father of a nation. God makes a promise to him that if Abraham will obey God and trust him he will bless him and make of him a great nation. Listen to this promise (read verses 1-3).

God makes this amazing promise, but Abraham and his wife Sarah have no children and they are both growing older. How could Abraham become the father of a nation? Sarah is now past the child bearing years. But listen to God’s promise – Genesis 15:1-6

God reaffirms this promise to Abraham, but then God does a most extraordinary thing. He enters into a covenant with Abraham. In those days a covenant was made by cutting an animal in two, making a type of sacrifice really, to show that this agreement was made in blood. It was a way of saying “may this happen to me if I break this covenant I am making with you.”

God instructs Abraham to take the animals of the future sacrificial system, a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon, cut them in two (with the exception of the birds), lay them on each side, and then the presence of God passed between those pieces. It was a covenant, initiated by God himself. Notice what verse 18 says: “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land...’”

God entered into this covenant with Abraham and Abraham obeyed and followed the Lord. God told him it would be a difficult journey at times and that slavery lay ahead for his descendants, but that when the time was complete he would lead them out in glory and victory.

God made a covenant with a man, signed and sealed it with blood and honored it to this day! The modern state of Israel is proof to us that God honors his promise. He is a keeper of covenant. I will give you this land and make of you a great nation and I will bless the world through you and that is exactly what he has done. But God made a covenant that would be tested and tried over the years. Exactly what he said would happen...happened.

Turn to Exodus 12. After 430 years, God says it is time to bring Israel out of their slavery and bondage and into the land of promise. You remember the story of the plagues of Egypt, convincing the pharaoh to let them go. Finally the Lord institutes the passover. God instructs the people to take a lamb without blemish, one for each family and to kill the lamb at twilight and then to put some of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the house in which they eat the passover. He tells them that he is going to bring judgement upon the land of Egypt and he will destroy the first born of every family in Egypt, but in verse 13 he tells them, “the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; when I see the blood, I will pass over you and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

A covenant is made with the family of Israel and after 430 years 600,000 men, plus women and children leave Egypt bound for the promised land. Turn with me now to Deuteronomy 6. Here is the commandment the Lord gives to the people of Israel as they are preparing to go into this promised land. “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And then God told them to be careful, that when they came into this land of milk and honey that they not forget where they had come from and that it was the Lord who had delivered them from slavery and brought them into this good land. And when your children ask about all

these commandments and decrees, you tell them we were once slaves in Egypt, but verse 23 says, **“He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.”**

That’s what he did for you, for us - he brought us out so he could bring us in - into a covenant relationship, into a new life, a new walk, to live with a new character, a new heart, a new outlook, a new perspective, a new identity and a new destiny. He brought us out of an old dead-end life to bring you into a new covenant relationship with him.

But look at that verse again. He brought us out in order to bring us in. Why? In order to keep his promise! To keep his covenant. He did it in order to “give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.” He did this because he promised Abraham and entered into a covenant with him. When God makes a promise, he keeps his promise. We saw it in Israel again and again. The prophet Isaiah said the lord would cause the desert to blossom and we saw the trees and the crops bearing fruit in the desert places. The prophet Ezekiel declared that the Lord would bring his people back to the land of Israel. He said, “I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.” Ezekiel 37:14. He made a promise to Abraham and he has kept that promise. What a country - and all of it is really about a covenant and a promise.

Now go with me to Luke 22:19-20. This is the passage from which the apostle Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 11. You hear me say this every time we receive communion. Some call it the words of institution.

“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” Luke 22:19-20

Jesus instituted a new covenant. Not a covenant like the one with Abraham that involved the killing of a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtle dove and a pigeon, not a covenant like the one he instituted with the families of Israel in the Exodus when they sacrificed a lamb. No this was a covenant like no other, a new covenant entered into by means of his own body and blood. This was a covenant signed and sealed in the blood of the perfect lamb, God’s own Son, slain for us.

The bible tells us that this new covenant was greater in every way for what that old

covenant could not do by the daily sacrifice of bulls and goats, Jesus did once and for all by his eternal sacrifice. Look with me at Hebrews 10:12. The bible says, "Jesus entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption." This wasn't a covenant that provided temporary relief, this wasn't about pushing the sins forward another year, this was about salvation. Do you understand what I'm saying? If the old covenant based upon the death of an animal brought forgiveness and cleansing, how much greater is that new covenant that is based upon the life and death of Jesus Christ, God's own Son? This isn't temporary relief, this is an eternal and everlasting covenant in his blood.

Look with me at Hebrews 10:14-23. It is a new and glorious covenant, an eternal and everlasting covenant, signed and sealed by the once and for all sacrifice of his blood. By that covenant he declares, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Now here is the bottom line. This is what the Lord seemed to impress upon me over and over again as we traveled around the nation of Israel these past couple of weeks. I think most all of us would say we believe all that has happened in Israel - becoming a nation in 1948, taking back the Old City and the Temple Mount in 1967, all of the victories won as they have been outnumbered by the Arab nations around them - that all of this is because of the covenant God made with Abraham back in Geneses 12 and 15. We believe it because we believe God keeps his covenant and honors his promise.

And if that is the case, then how can you doubt his saving grace, his forgiveness, his mercy towards you when that forgiveness and grace is based upon a greater covenant than the one with Abraham. It is based upon a higher promise than the one with Israel.

Friends, as surely as the word of the prophets concerning Israel has come to pass, his word concerning you will come to pass. If you surrender your life to him and trust him for his forgiveness and mercy and grace, he will remember your sins and your lawless deeds no more. You can trust him because he is a keeper of his covenants.

Hebrews 10:23 declares, **"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." Hebrews 10:23**

We just came back from a land that is a testimony to the faithfulness of our God, but there is a greater testimony than the nation of Israel - it is that old rugged cross where Jesus gave

his life for us. Can you trust this eternal one? The eternal keeper of his promise? Let me say it again, “he is faithful!” He promised and you can rest in that promise. As surely as God kept his promise to Abraham and Israel, he will keep his promise to you.

What a country. What a promise. What a covenant. What a hope and assurance we have through Christ.

Hold fast to the confession of our hope. Don’t waver – and notice the basis for our not wavering - it’s not about us - it is simply because he who has promised is faithful.

We come to the Lord’s table today in full assurance. Full assurance of his saving, keeping grace. Full assurance, not in our selves or our goodness, but in the One who is faithful. Full assurance that by his grace we are saved.

Welcome to the Lord’s table today! 1 Corinthians 11:23-26