

The Promise of an Eternal Covenant

Our confession of faith states that we believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. The Bible and the OT in particular are being dismissed as irrelevant by the secular world. Scriptural values that were once upheld in the western world are now being categorized as intolerant. In John 15 Jesus says the world will hate us if we belong to him, and we see that happening already in Canada. As believers we must all be scriptural apologists, at least to the point that we believe what we say we believe. The reality is God has given us all of the books of the Bible for a purpose, which I think, is the story of his mission to save his creation, and God's promise of an eternal covenant begins with his creation. There are many threads that link the OT to the NT, the one we are going follow is the genealogy of Jesus. There are number of people who are listed in the genealogical list of Jesus that played a significant role in the promises that God has made and are presented in the Bible to show us how God prepared the way for an eternal covenant. There is nothing new in these stories but together, they show how the actions of the righteous ancestors of Jesus enabled us to be blessed to live in a time that is under the mercy of an eternal covenant, and by understanding these truths we can strengthen our resolve to refute the world's criticisms of God's word.

The Bible is a tangible link to God and the threads through the Bible begin and end with Jesus. Jesus quoted the OT around 180 times, and the authors of the gospels and letters quoted the OT another 100 times, but if you include the allusions and references to the OT there are over 4000 of them in the NT, so it is our imperative to study both testaments together.

The Bible is not and was never meant to be a scientific explanation of who God is, but for those scientists who delve into trying to understand creation through science, it is not the scientific concepts that bring them closer to seeing God as the creator it is what they see beyond the data. Dr. Stephen Meyer who has a PHD in the Philosophy of Science uses math to demonstrate this, something as simple as Pythagoras' Theorem, (slide) the right-angle triangle $A^2+B^2=C^2$. Pythagoras did not invent the right-angle triangle, he discovered the concept of the formula to describe something that already existed, this is actually true of all the mathematical formulas – they point to an intricate design. Science can only

discover what God designed and created. Science can and should pique our interest in the creator but only God's word can lead us to righteousness.

Matthew and Luke went to the length of connecting separate genealogies of Jesus, we do not know where they got all the names from, but Matthew's description is more of a legal tie to the House of David, whereas Luke provides a list of biological descendants, and what they ultimately provide is the path of righteousness.

So, we begin at the beginning, with Adam and Eve, who were presented with having the knowledge of good and evil, but it wasn't simply an understanding of the difference, it was as the serpent said, "you can be like God", and as such you can determine your own moral values to guide your choices apart from pleasing God.

After the fall and the expulsion from the Garden, they were also separated from the presence of God, but God continues to interact with those that remain close to him, partly through the sacrifices that were presented to him. The sacrifices determined the heart of the giver and Cain is found wanting in his sacrifice causing the next turning point with the slaying of Abel. Cain and his family are banished to live separate from the rest of the family creating a path that further separates them from God.

But God chooses to continue to use humans to carry out his plan with the birth of Adams son, Seth. In Gen. 3:15 (slide) God curses the serpent and makes his first promise to provide someone to deal with the serpent, Seth's life will provide the ancestral lineage.

Does anyone remember a comic strip from the 1970's called B.C. drawn by Johnny Hart, he often had biblical overtones in his strip, this was his spin on Gen. 3:15. (slide) Jane the cavewoman would club the snake every time she saw it.

In Gen. 5:1-32 we see the lineage from Seth to Noah. The Bible provides little information about the time from Seth to Noah but a pivotal verse is Gen. 6:2 (slide). This verse has been open to much interpretation, the sons of God have been interpreted as angels elsewhere in the Bible, but in this instance, it is probably referring to the descendants of Seth who had been continuing to walk with God, and the daughters of humans is probably a reference to the

descendants of Cain who no longer walked with God. We can suppose that God purposely separated them to keep Seths' descendants on a righteous path but the temptation was too great and in Gen. 6:5 (slide) we read that there were only evil thoughts all of time. I used to think that Jesus would return when humanity reached the same level of depravity as this, but consider that they had no written law given by God, no covenant with God, no prophets, and no priests to intercede, a time when only your personal ability to maintain a heart for God would save you, a test everyone but one man and his family failed. Noah was found to be a righteous man in God's eyes. Gen. 6:8,9 (slide).

In this account God destroys the bulk of his creation, an entire civilization, which provides us with the greatest example of what we can expect from God's final judgement if we are not seen as righteous. In Gen. 9:11 (slide) God makes a covenant to never again destroy his creation with a flood with the sign of a rainbow. God also blesses Noah in Gen. 9:7 (slide) and carries on this blessing through Noah's son Shem.

Luke provides the genealogy from Shem to Abraham but the Bible does not provide much information, Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham, but sandwiched between Noah and Abraham is the account of the Tower of Babel which will help us understand the calling of Abraham.

Humans were once again heading down a path of self-destruction, the tower of Babel was probably similar to a Ziggurat, many of which have been discovered in what was then the land of Ur and today is Iraq (Slide), this was a rebellion against God, another attempt to be like God by trying to build an access to the heavens. We know of course that God punished humans by confusing the common language and dispersing the people. So out of that upheaval Abram was sent by God from Ur and directs him to Canaan Gen. 12:21. We don't know how God presented himself to Abram but in Heb. 11:8-12 it tells us that Abram listened to God because of his faith. In Gen. 17:4 (slide) God makes a promise to Abram of a homeland and changes his name to Abraham, meaning father of many, a promise of many descendants.

Abraham and Sarah try to hurry God's plan when no children arrive and they devise a plan to have a child through a servant woman named Hagar and a child

called Ishmael is born, but this is not to be the genealogical line that God has planned and eventually they have their own son Isaac Gen. 21:3(slide).

We know that the account of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is intertwined in Abraham's life but it is not part of the thread we are following, but it is a further example of God's judgement of the unrighteous.

In Gen. 22 we have the account of God testing Abraham with the life of his son Isaac, which provides a demonstration of Abraham's complete trust in God.

Isaac is the continuation of God's promise.

Isaac and Rebekah also struggle with having children but God eventually blesses them with twin sons, Esau and Jacob, Rebekah feels the struggle between the two boys already beginning in her womb, and God explains to her that the struggle is of two nations and that the older will serve the younger.

In Gen 26;3(slide) God passes the blessing he gave Abraham onto Isaac and when it came time for Isaac to pass on his blessing to what should have been his oldest son, Rebekah intercedes for Jacob as she is aware of God's plan for Jacob, but this is not just Rebekah's deception but also Isaac's stubbornness in following tradition rather than asking for God's lead. Probably not God's preferred way of having his plan come to fruition but in the end, Jacob receives God's blessing in Gen 28:13-15(slide) and he becomes the father of the Israelite nation, and we transition from the stories being about individuals to being about a group of people.

We have two records of Jacob encountering God, in Gen 32:26 Jacob wrestles with a divine being and demands another blessing out of fear of what his brother Esau might do to him and in Gen 35:12(slide) God reiterates his blessing of land and descendants and changes his name to Israel.

The accounts of Jacob and his sons, particularly Joseph, are very interesting, but our thread leads us to Jacob's third son Judah. Jacob's first three sons disqualify themselves for the blessing of the eldest son through their own actions and Judah eventually receives Jacob's blessing.

We have Judah's story in Gen 38 and it is one of transformation. The family practice of deception is rife in Judah's household. Judah marries a Canaanite woman unlike his forefathers, his two oldest sons Er and Onan are deemed wicked

by God and put to death. The oldest son's wife Tamar is protected by tradition and should have been provided for by another son but the third son Shelah was too young and Judah refuses to fulfill this promise to Tamar. Tamar uses deception to conceive a son through Judah. God uses this situation to help Judah recognize his own failings in Gen 38:26 (slide) and he declares Tamar's innocence in achieving what was rightfully hers. In this strange set of circumstances Tamar births another set of twins and it is again the second son Perez who will be an ancestor to David and Jesus. Tamar is the first woman who is stated as part of the genealogy of Jesus. It is also this situation that transforms Judah and he is the first to take responsibility for what happened to Joseph and sets the scene for the family's move to Egypt.

God uses Joseph to once again reunite the family. Joseph tests his brothers with the life of Benjamin and it is Judah who steps in to offer his life instead. This is a transformational time of forgiveness and reconciliation for Joseph and his brothers, during this time in Egypt they will prosper into the people group that was promised by God, the twelve tribes of Israel.

In Gen. 49:10 (slide) we can read Jacob's blessing of Judah and it foretells the coming of the Messiah.

We know that eventually their time in Egypt turns to suffering and God reiterates his promise for having their own homeland through a representative he has provided – Moses.

The escape from Egypt is fascinating but we do not have time for details. What follows is what we know is the Exodus where God will shape this group of people into his nation of followers, the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers provide many detailed accounts of the trials and successes of the people of Israel but the most important is God providing a written law, his first covenant that will provide for a path of redemption and forgiveness.

In Exodus 19:5-6 (slide) God restates his promise but defines what it will mean for Israel as a nation of people. Moses of course is denied entry into the promised land and the responsibility of the nation falls on Joshua's shoulders. The fall of Jericho provides us with the story of Rahab helping the Israelite spies. Rahab's story is of a non-Israelite woman who recognizes God's plan and puts her trust in

him and becomes a part of God's path of righteousness. Rahab marries Salmon a descendant of Judah and they would have a son named Boaz.

Ruth is the third woman to be mentioned in Jesus' lineage; her story is the epitome of the human struggle and God's grace, and there is so much to gain from this example but that is another sermon or two. Ruth eventually will marry Boaz and they will become the great grandparents of David.

The time period after Joshua dies is when Israel is ruled by Judges, which spans about 300 years until the Israelite nation asks God to provide a King who is of course Saul, who is eventually replaced by God with David. David's life is another example of someone we should slow down to examine closer as he was so human in his failings but also so tied to his devotion to God and the victories that He provided, but we don't have the time for this either.

God's covenant with David was first thought to mean David should build a house for God, a temple, but God's meaning of his covenant was that God would build David's house and that his son Solomon would build the temple. It is interesting how God uses David's relationship with Bathsheba to continue David's lineage to the Messiah.

The unification of Israel that took place under David's rule was undone under his son Solomon through failures that would eventually cause a division of the kingdom. The time of the Kings after David is ultimately seen mostly as a failure of lapses from their trust in God, Solomons two sons divide the Kingdom in 931 BC and two hundred years later the northern kingdom is over run by Assyria. The southern Kingdom of Judah lasts another 130 years when it is destroyed and dispersed by Babylon. Although Elijah despairs that he is all alone at this time, God tells him that there are still those who have not bowed to Baal 1 Kings 19:18(slide).

The Israelites are allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple some 40 years later. Zerubbabel is the descendant who is chosen to do this in Haggai 1:14(slide).

Although Luke and Matthew differ on which of David's sons follow the genealogical record, either Nathan or Solomon, and there are some lengthy explanations for this we will not get into, as they both get back on track with

Zerubbabel, who they both state as a descendant of David. After Zerubbabel there is a 400-year gap when God did not actively reveal anything to his people through the prophets, so nothing is told about these descendants listed in the gospels, which takes us to the time of the Roman rule of Judah. The completion of the genealogical record is of course Mary and Joseph, although lineage was typically seen through the male counterpart, Matthew lists Mary as he did with Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, Mary's response to the angel at the foretelling of the child she was to bear was one of complete servitude to God. Mary came from the same small community as Joseph so it likely their ancestry was intertwined. In Matthew 1:19 Joseph is called a righteous man, the Bible does not use the term righteous lightly, it is the only path to God. Mary and Joseph were the culmination of God's path of righteousness.

Let me summarize what we have just looked at. God first provides a situation to see if humans can maintain a righteous relationship without his intervention and we see from the account of the flood that humans are not capable of that. Then God intervenes by providing the first covenant of laws with which to guide us to a righteous relationship with God, which the people also struggle with due to the anointed priesthood losing their focus on God's desires. Then God provides full intervention on our behalf through the sacrifice that Jesus provides for us with His second and his eternal covenant.

The culmination of God's plan for our salvation may seem at first simplistic, why didn't God just start with an eternal covenant. God's whole mission to save his creation is an exercise in mankind's free will, and our utter failure to make righteous choices on our own, we can look at the lives that came before us and have the hindsight to be able to compare what our lives would be like without the cross.

In a recent article by Neil deGrasse Tyson a secular pre-eminent astro-physicist and self-described atheist, stated that if there was a God he would not have been very intelligent as there are so many flaws in the world. This seems to be the fallback position for ardent atheists – if there is a god why is there so much suffering in the world. This is not so much a denial of God's existence but the desire to believe there is no such thing as sin and the corruption it has brought onto God's creation, making our world as flawed as it is, and without sin they have

no culpability in those flaws, which provides them with no need for accountability, believing that they live within the guidelines of their own truth and as the serpent said “you can be like god” and determine what moral values will guide you.

The NT gives us salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus; the OT gives us the truth of God’s judgement without excepting the sacrifice that Jesus made.