

Your Questions Bible Answers

What Is Grace? (Part 2)

Grace & Covenants

When we think of a covenant terms like “agreement” or “contract” come to mind, but they are insufficient to describe God’s covenant with man. Volumes have been written comparing treaties of the ancient world to Biblical covenants, but when we examine God’s covenants in the light of Scripture we see that these should not be viewed through the prism of treaties, but through the love of the Father who desires a relationship with His creation. The covenants of God are not agreements that He arbitrarily takes-up or lays-aside, but lasting relationships that He forges with man. Perhaps we would do well to adopt this simplified definition: “The Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ probably means ‘betweenness,’ emphasizing the relational element that lies at the basis of all covenants” (Youngblood).¹

These relationships are founded on His grace, contain stipulations that will keep man in the covenant relationship and depend on man’s faithfulness for the relationship to be maintained. And as we will see, the riches of God’s grace are found in His covenants.

God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15)

Before we consider God’s grace to us in the new covenant, it will be helpful to examine the basic principles of God’s covenants. We begin with God’s covenant with Abraham where we see all basic features of this relationship with God.

1. God’s covenants are founded on His grace.
 - a. Surely it was grace when God made His wondrous promises to Abram, “And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12.2-3).
 - b. Another manifestation of His grace occurred in Genesis 15 when God confirmed His promises through a covenant with Abram. The chapter begins with God’s assurance to Abram, “I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great” (v. 1), but Abram’s doubts are soon evident. Perhaps ten years had passed since God’s initial promises, but Abram was still without an heir. God assured Abram by reiterating the promise of offspring, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them...so shall your descendants be” (v. 5). Abram responded with faith and the Lord offered further assurance by establishing a covenant with him, symbolically passing through the sacrificed animals, revealing what lay in the future and promising that to Abram’s “descendants I have given this land” (v. 18).
 - c. The chapter begins with Abram in doubt, but ends with him assured by the covenant relationship with the Lord. His promises would be kept, His grace would be realized.

¹ Youngblood, Ronald F., F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1995.

2. God's covenants usually contain stipulations, conditions man must meet to receive His gracious promises.
 - a. There was the giving of law to Abram even as God made gracious promises to him: "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12.1).
 - b. After the covenant was established God reminded Abram of the necessity of obedience for the covenant to be established: "I am God Almighty, walk before Me, and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly" (Gen. 17.1-2).
 - c. And of course there was God's testing of Abraham in Genesis 22, giving the command for Abraham to sacrifice the son of promise. Abraham's willingness to obey was rewarded: "By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22.16-18).
 - d. Abraham's obedience to the laws and ordinances of God insured that the grace of the covenant promises would be fulfilled even if Abraham's descendants were not faithful. Significantly, when God declared the covenant promises to Isaac it was because "Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws" (Gen. 26.5). Abraham kept the law of his covenant with God.
3. Faith serves as the bridge between God's gracious promises and man's dutiful obedience to covenant law..
 - a. As the Hebrew writer reminds us, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11.8-10).
 - b. Only faith, complete trust in a faithful God, could allow Abraham to leave his country, go to a land he did not know and sojourn there. Only faith could move him to seek the truly great rewards of a gracious God.
 - c. Turning our attention again to the covenant God established with Abraham in Genesis 15, we see the integral role of faith. In a moment of weakness Abram doubted how the promises of God could be fulfilled, but when God assured him of those promises, Abram "believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). With faith restored and strengthened in his gracious God, a covenant relationship came into existence. When the ultimate test of that faith came with the command to kill the son of promise, Abraham did not waiver, trusting that his God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11.17-19), trusting that God would keep the covenant promises. Truly, Abraham's faith was shown by his works.