

Deuteronomy 29:2-4, 9-18
Covenant: God's Promise of Relationship
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This is the second Sunday in a series of messages in which we are studying the Trinity. In the Bible, we hear God describe himself using three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—equal in stature, proceeding from one another, united in their mission. Now, for over seventeen hundred years, Christians from East and West have held on to this beautiful image of the Trinity, God's triune nature. It is at once majestic, offering this beautiful and relational view of God; and at the same time totally mystifying—we still haven't figured it out completely. We've tried though, and it continues to invite us deeper.

Last week we began *in the beginning*: God created. And we looked at the Bible's narrative of creation, how God not only creates all things, but God creates all things good and with order, giving meaning to the cosmos.

But this week, I want to take that one step further, that the God we meet in the pages of Scripture is not just the heavenly watchmaker, who puts things together, winds them up, and walks away. The Bible teaches that God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, not only creates, but God also *relates*. One of my favorite writers, the German theologian and pastor Helmut Thielicke, writes this: "The way God becomes believable to us is not only through what he does, but through the people who are involved in that action."

The Scriptures present a God who is intimate and relational. God invests in the lives of his creation. God is not cold and distant, but warm and near to us, like a faithful and loving parent. What I hope to accomplish today is to help us see why the God we meet in the Bible is much preferable to the caricatured god of our culture.

First, I want to start with a picture of the god our culture has created. Christian Smith, a sociologist from Notre Dame, recently conducted the most extensive study of youth and spirituality ever performed, and compiled his findings into a book called *Soul Searching*. What he discovered was that the God many self-identifying Christian teens described was not actually the God we meet in the pages of the Bible, but one of their own preference. The faith he learned about as he interviewed these kids was what he called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That is God was moralistic: God wants us to behave and be good little girls and boys; Therapeutic: God is there to comfort us when we're having a hard time, but only when we need him to be, other times, God can stay safely on the shelf; Deism: that it doesn't matter how or what or in whom we believe as long as we're well intentioned. Does this sound familiar to any of you? Have you ever encountered this view of God or one similar? This, I'd like to suggest, is how many American teens...and their parents... think when they think about God.

But what I'd like to suggest is that this faith does not have the strength to be of any real use to us when we begin to search for true meaning and purpose. This faith will not hold

up to the winds of disappointment and strife that rage against our boat. In short, this faith has no teeth because we determine how and when this god is involved. Do you want to worship a God who is only as powerful as those who believe in him allow him to be, based on how much they allow him impact over their lives? Do you want the wet-noodle god, or do you want to know the God who spoke into the dark nothingness before creation and said “let there be light”? This God is not only the God who creates; God is also the God who relates. And the way God relates to his creation is through something called a covenant.

This morning, Brandon read from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons Moses preached just before he died. And in his final days, he stressed to the people of Israel that they needed to be in a covenant relationship with God. What is this covenant relationship with God?

Verse 12 and 13 say **so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God...that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God.** The text uses personal possessive pronouns, not just generalities: you will be a people, or god will be a god. No, God says I will be *your* God and you will be *my* people. There is a personal, intimate, possessive relationship that God establishes.

But it also has a legal component to it. God seals it with an oath, confirming its legality.

Author and pastor Tim Keller has this quote about covenants, he says: “A covenant is a completely unique relationship, it is more loving than a mere legal relationship; yet it is more binding and enduring and accountable than a merely personal relationship.” A covenant is both personal and loving, and legal and contractual. It’s comforting and it has teeth that can really dig.

The problem is that for many, covenant relationships are lost on them. Most people are guided primarily by their self-interests; my own happiness and the fulfillment of the self trumps the terms of all other obligations. In modern society, your individual happiness and rights come first, and all other institutions and relationships are a means to an end.

In our day, this is what it sounds like: ***As long as*** you’re meeting my needs and being who you’re supposed to be, I will be who I should be. And once you’re no longer fulfilling your end of the bargain, if my needs are no longer being met, I’m out.

But a covenant relationship is two people looking at one another and saying to each other: I promise to be who I am supposed to be in this relationship whether you are what you’re supposed to be or not.

If two people look at one another and say, “I commit to making your needs, your security, your safety, your contentment, your life more important than my own,” if both parties look at one another and each say this, that is a far more precious and safe and fulfilling relationship than a consumer one that says “as long as.”

From the religious standpoint, has anyone ever heard this one? “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” As a pastor, I hear this all the time. Here’s what it means: I want a relationship with God, but only on my terms. I don’t want to go to an institution or a church or synagogue, I don’t want to give up my right to determine what’s right or wrong for me, I don’t want anyone telling me what to do. I want a personal relationship with God, but not a covenantal relationship with God.

But in the Scriptures, God’s relating to humans, God’s relational identity is ONLY ever in covenant terms – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses. It is always covenantal.

The second part of this discussion about covenants is the mystery we see about this covenant. Covenants and contracts all have terms that must be met. When the terms are met, there is blessing, and if they’re not met, there’s what? A penalty, or in the biblical case, a curse. These are what give contracts teeth, the rewards for keeping them and the penalties if they’re not kept. It’s what keeps us honest to our word so that we don’t just say, “Well, who cares? It doesn’t matter.” Early in this passage, God offers blessing to those who keep it. But then later in the passage that Brandon began to read, it says in verse 18, **Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods... The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him.**

But wait a minute, I thought God was a loving and forgiving God. What’s all this stuff about curses and punishment? This is where we get at the heart of Covenantal Theology, and the heart of the Christian message. Throughout the Old and New Testament, on every page of the Bible, you have statements that say things like “I am a righteous judge,” “I cannot bless a disobedient people,” “the wages of sin is death,” “justice is my nature,” “I can’t just turn a blind eye to wrongdoing.” There are statements like that on every page, but there are also statements on every page that say things like “I will never leave you or forsake you,” “I will deliver you,” “I will be merciful and kind to you,” “I will always accept you.”

Do you see this tension? This tension is constantly at work, it under-girds the entire Bible, it is the thing that propels the biblical narrative forward. Will God cave in and accept what they do? Well, what about holiness and justice? Will God condemn them and punish them for their sins? What about God’s love and faithfulness?

Is God’s love and blessing conditional or unconditional? This is the great tension, it’s like a pendulum: on one side you have legalism, the other relativism. So often, people gravitate to one side or another. Either we look at God’s relationship to us through moral terms—you’ve got to be good or God’s not going to like you; or we look at it in relativistic terms – yes, God demands all these things and, yes, God is holy, but God’s going to forgive us anyways, so it doesn’t really matter.

On the one hand, God presents his identity as loving and kind and merciful, but on the other hand, God is holy and demanding of perfection. People naturally gravitate toward one interpretation or another. But I'm not sure we're supposed to be comfortable with one or the other. I think the heart of things lie in the tension. Karl Barth called this the dialectic, God is completely holy and has no part of sin, AND God is full of grace; God is completely just, punishing sin AND God is merciful and longsuffering with his people.

How do we resolve this tension? Look at verse 13: that he may be your God, as he swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God relates to his people by making a covenant with them, an oath promising to be their God and that they will be his people. This intimate and binding relationship is how the God who formed the cosmos also chose to relate to his creation.

So how did this happen? Where did God take the oath to Abraham? It's in Genesis 15, and if we understand Genesis 15, we're at the heart of what the entire Bible is all about.

In Genesis 15, God tells Abraham that God is going to bless him. *But how do I know? How can I be sure of it?* So God tells Abram to kill some animals and separate them in two rows forming an aisle. In ancient times, this is how a lord would enter into an agreement with a vassal. The lord would sacrifice some animals and divide them, then the servant would walk between them stating the terms of the covenant. Basically, what he was saying was that "if I don't hold up my end of this agreement, may I become like these animals, dead meat."

In Genesis 15, Abram is getting ready for a covenant ceremony, and he was expecting that when God said I'm going to bless you, that that blessing would be contingent upon Abraham's fidelity to the oath. That's how it worked, that was common practice. So Abraham waited, and waited, and the Bible says that Abraham fell into a deep sleep and a darkness fell upon him, and in the midst of the darkness was God. **Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age."**

God was making an oath to Abram, and it is God who comes as a smoking firepot, and it's God who passes through the pieces. This is one of the very most important images in the entire Bible and absolutely central to our faith, for this reason: what God is saying to Abram here is not only is he blessing him, but he's saying that he promises to put his life on the line if he doesn't bless him. That's the first remarkable thing, God passes through the pieces, but the second remarkable, do you notice this? Who *doesn't* pass through the pieces? Abram, Abram never passes through the pieces. The servant, the vassal never makes the oath, only the Lord does. That means God was making the oath for both of them, God was taking responsibility for both sides. God was saying "let me be torn to pieces if I don't keep my end of the bargain," AND "let me be torn to pieces if you don't keep your end of the bargain."

Do you see how remarkable this is? This is at the very heart of the Christian faith, this is the beauty and the uniqueness of Christianity, apart from all others, and the heart of it is grace.

So far in our study of the Trinity, we have encountered God, whose voice set the cosmos spinning, who remains infinitely greater than the hundreds of billions of galaxies out there, who made this earth infinitely complex and beautiful, and is also known and relational with his people. God not only creates, but God relates to us, making a promise that began with Abram, a binding eternal covenant of love, family, land, and relationship. That covenant was made and ratified without Abram's involvement. This is the Paradox of God's love that makes the Christian faith such a constant pursuit, completely holy and full of grace; just and merciful, all knowing and freeing. Paradox, beauty, subtlety, love, all love.

And how the terms and conditions of the covenant are finally fulfilled and humanity's future secured, we will pick up on next week as we continue our study and move to the second person of the Trinity. I'll even give you the answer...it's Jesus.

Let's pray:

Father, we thank you that in your infinite mercy and love, you have chosen humanity as your beloved and invited us into a covenant relationship. A relationship that you, and you alone, establish, so that in our imperfect obedience, you cover us with your perfect love and holiness and obedience. Guide our thoughts and minds this week as we consider your example to us, that our lives might be more faithfully lived in you. In your name we pray, amen.