

THE GOSPEL PROJECT - CHRONOLOGICAL

THE STORY BEGINS

GOD THE COVENANT MAKER

God Reaffirms the Covenant

In order to really know someone, we have to know “their story.” For example, John and I lived across the street from Mary Carmichael’s mother, Liz Rutledge, for almost 40 years. Mary had already moved away from home by the time we moved on the street. I knew Mrs. Rutledge had a daughter who lived near Memphis and loved animals. However, it was not until Mary herself moved back home that I began to know her personally. As time went by, I learned “her story” and thereby came to know her as a personal friend.

We can know about God or we can know God! We can hear bits and pieces about God all our lives but having a personal relationship with God changes everything! We first learn how God keeps His promises from the record of His Word. The Bible reveals on page after page that the LORD kept His promises to those in the past. This knowledge enables us to be confident that we can trust Him to keep His promises in the present and the future! The Bible reveals the one True God as the Covenant Maker. Keep in mind that a covenant, in the biblical sense, is more than a contract or simple agreement. A contract always has an end date, while a covenant is a permanent arrangement.

God’s covenant with Abraham began like this: **Genesis 15:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”* Later, the LORD expanded on His covenant with Abraham. **Genesis 17:8 (ESV)** ⁸ *And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”*

Once again in the life of Abraham’s son, Isaac, we learn that God continues to keep His promises throughout the generations.

Read Genesis 25:19-26 (ESV) ¹⁹ *These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac,* ²⁰ *and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah ... to be his wife.* ²¹ *And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.* ²² *The children struggled together within her, and she said, “If it is thus, why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.* ²³ *And the LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.”* ²⁴ *When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.* ²⁵ *The first came out*

red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.²⁶ Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

Isaac was 60 when his twins were born. Isaac and Rebekah waited 20 years for the birth of their children. Isaac's father had waited 25 years for the birth of Isaac. God had made a promise to Isaac's father, Abraham, that his seed would be multiplied but like many of God's promises the promise was not fulfilled immediately. Whether or not Isaac fretted over the delay in having an heir as his father had done, we are not told. However, we are told that *Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife... And the LORD granted his prayer.* How excited we feel when a prayer is answered! Undoubtedly, Isaac and Rebekah were exuberant when they discovered Rebekah was pregnant.

As so often happens in life, when we get one prayer answered, then another problem arises. When Rebekah finally became pregnant, the pregnancy itself was the problem. The babies in her womb struggled with one another. Warren Wiersbe explains that the Hebrew word used means "to crush or oppress," suggesting that the fetal movements were not normal. Since Rebekah wondered if the Lord was trying to say something to her, she turned to God for counsel. God revealed to Rebekah that the problems she was having were only the beginning of the problems to come between her twins. I rarely think of Rebekah's two sons as being twins – they were so different – certainly not identical twins – nevertheless, twins they were.

In hindsight, we can see that the struggle of these two boys, which began before their birth, represents the struggle which still goes on in the world today – the struggle between light and darkness, between good and evil, between the Spirit and the flesh. We see this struggle within even Christian families today where two children are raised the same way and yet one chooses to walk the broad way that leads to destruction and one follows the narrow way that leads to eternal life. We experience this struggle between light and dark within our own selves as well. As close as Paul came to the Lord, he still wrote in **Romans 7:15 (ESV)**¹⁵ *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

Many of us have the tendency to "get down" on ourselves at times – sometimes to the point of thinking that we are unworthy to receive the promises of God. We are right – we are unworthy but our God keeps His promises even to unworthy people.

Read Genesis 26:1-6 (ESV)¹ *Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines.² And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you.³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed,⁵ because*

*Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”⁶
So Isaac settled in Gerar.*

Here in Gerar we see the LORD repeating to Isaac the promise He had previously made to his father, Abraham. I just mentioned that God keeps His promises to unworthy people. From this passage, you might wonder why I would mention unworthiness regarding one who so obediently lay on the altar beneath the knife of his father on Mt. Moriah. It is because Isaac experienced a lapse in faith at Gerar. Gerar was an ancient Philistine city. During a famine, Abraham and his wife Sarah journeyed to Gerar. Fearing for his life, Abraham concealed the truth that Sarah was his wife, calling her his sister – this was a half truth – since Abraham and Sarah were half-brother and sister. **Genesis 26:7-16** records how Isaac told the same lie regarding his wife, Rebekah. Why did Isaac feel compelled to lie? Because he was afraid his pagan host would kill him in order to have his beautiful wife. His lie was evidence of his unbelief in God’s promise. Isaac’s lie reminds us how easy it is to connive and use deception when we are fearful instead of trusting in God to be faithful to His promises.

As you know, we are doing a chronological Bible study. However, our next passage is out of chronological order. Today, we pick up with Isaac’s son, Jacob, on his way to Haran. Next week, we will study why he made this journey. Today, we look in on Jacob at the moment, he received the same promise that his father and grandfather had received.

God keeps His promises by offering us His Presence.

Read Genesis 28:10-17 (ESV) ¹⁰ *Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran.* ¹¹ *And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.* ¹² *And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!* ¹³ *And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.* ¹⁴ *Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* ¹⁵ *Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* ¹⁶ *Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.”* ¹⁷ *And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

Jacob slept on the ground with a stone for his pillow. I am told this was a common practice in the Near East. The stone was probably more for protection than a pillow. After all, if you have a rock underneath your head, you may have a weapon nearby. As I think of Jacob resting his head on a literal stone, I am reminded of Jesus being our cornerstone today. He said in **Mark 12:10**

*(ESV)*¹⁰ *Have you not read this Scripture: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus is our Stone of Protection!*

God used dreams and visions (visions are “waking dreams) in the Bible to communicate with people since in those days they did not have personal written copies of the Word of God. Visions seem to have been common enough in Old Testament times that when they did not occur they were missed. With the completion of the Bible, God does not use dreams and visions as frequently. That is not to say that He cannot or does not; God communicates with us however He chooses. But when we have a decision to make, our first stop should always be the Bible and prayer, not a dream.

As Jacob slept, he had a dream in which he saw a ladder or stairway with angels going up and down between heaven and earth. I do not believe that we should look at Jacob’s dream literally since we know that angels do not need to use ladders to move in and out of heaven. Our focus should be on the LORD above the staircase. Jacob was in a desolate place – feeling very much alone and that is when the LORD revealed His Presence! Jacob was not alone because God Himself was with him!

For those who accept Christ as Savior, we also have His Presence with us. Jesus said in **John 14:16-17 (ESV)**¹⁶ *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,*¹⁷ *even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.* I fail to completely comprehend it but nevertheless it is true – God’s Spirit dwells within His children. The Presence of the Holy Spirit within us is the way God sealed His covenant of grace with us. **Ephesians 1:13-14 (ESV)**¹³ *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,*¹⁴ *who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

When we studied the story of the Tower of Babel, we saw men attempting to go “up” to God on their own terms. We see the LORD in this stairway dream of Jacob foreshadowing the coming down of God’s Son to earth. Because Jesus came down, we can go up! Jesus said to Nathaniel in **John 1:51 (ESV)** *... “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* Jesus is the Way – the Only Way – not a Tower of Babel built on our own good works.

The significance of Jesus as our Ladder into Heaven is complemented through God’s renewed promise to Jacob: *in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* How are all the families of the earth blessed? We are blessed by Jesus, the descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.