

GOVERNMENT BY COVENANT
GENESIS 12-EXODUS 20

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Eddie was born in New York City to poor Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. While still a child, his parents moved the family to Kansas. As a teenager Eddie got a job working in a clothing store in downtown Kansas City. There he met HS, who had a series of clerical jobs downtown. Although HS was seven years older than Eddie and a Protestant from English roots, the two of them hit it off.

When World War I broke out, both of them signed up to go to war. A group of young men from Kansas City were sent together to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. There they were placed in an artillery unit and trained for war. The two friends offered to run a camp canteen. Usually such ventures were money losers. But Eddie and HS fronted their own money and proved to be efficient young businessmen. By the time they were shipped off to Europe, they had turned a profit of \$10,000. That was a lot of money in those days.

The two friends saw action against the Germans in France. The two of them and their artillery unit served honorably in the war. They survived the fighting without injury and returned to the States in 1920.

The two of them decided to go into business together. They set up a haberdashery, a clothing store (PROJECTOR ON--- EDDIE JACOBSON 1) for men, in downtown Kansas City. It was successful at first. But then in 1921 the country encountered a recession, and the men's business was forced into bankruptcy. It would take both Eddie and HS a number of years to pay off their debts. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The two men went their separate ways in terms of careers after that. Eddie became a traveling salesman. HS was appointed a county judge, despite the fact that he did not have a college degree. He had attended law school, but he never earned a degree.

As WW II approached, Eddie became increasingly concerned about the growing anti-Semitism in Europe, especially Germany. He developed contacts with fellow Jews in Europe and Palestine. As the war drew to a close, stories about the Holocaust began to come out. Many Jews were fleeing to Palestine. The British had governed Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations for several decades. But Arabs and Jews had been fighting each other and the British. The Brits wanted out of their commitment there. The new United Nations was trying to divide up Palestine into Jewish and Arab areas. Neighboring Arab states were threatening to overrun the Jews when the British pulled out.

Jews from Palestine and from around the world were appealing to the US for help and for recognition of a separate Jewish state. President Truman had come into power at the end of the war after the death of Franklin Roosevelt. His Secretary of State George Marshall was strongly opposed to recognizing the new Jewish state. He told Truman that he would not even vote for him in the next election if he recognized Israel. A number of Zionist lobbyists had visited the White House. Truman got irritated by them and told his chief of staff to not let any more of them see him.

Eddie was aware of some of these doings. He had no political power, but his friend HS had ended up in government in Washington. So in March of 1948 he went to Washington. He brought with him Chaim Weitzmann, who would soon become the President of Israel. Although he had no appointment, he showed up in the office of HS, who was his lifelong friend. That meeting appears to have significant historical significance. (EDDIE JACOBSON 2 WITH HARRY TRUMAN) For President Harry S. Truman could not turn away his friend from Kansas, Eddie Jacobson. He listened to Eddie and the Jewish political leader.

On the evening of May 14, 1948, President Truman announced the official US recognition of the new nation of Israel. While it was the evening of the 14th in the US, it was the morning of May 15 in Palestine. When the British Mandate expired at midnight, the Jews announced the formation of the modern nation of Israel. The first country in the world to recognize Israel was the United States. After disappearing from history for 2000 years, Israel was once again a nation. US support was to prove to be crucial to Israel's survival. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our subject is a Biblical View of Civil Government. I tell this story because our study is advancing through Biblical history into the record of God's dealing with the Jewish people. How God deals with Israel as a nation has relevance to us today.

Learning about what God says regarding civil government should help us to be more effective in our praying for governing officials, in knowing how to vote, in knowing what to expect from our leaders, and in understanding when we should disobey government. We have seen thus far that God is the sovereign source of all governing authority. He has created us humans in His image, which means that good government should defend human life from the womb to the tomb. We have great value and worth, but we also saw last week that we are deeply flawed creatures who have inherited a sin nature from Adam. We need policing and we need checks on our governing officials because they also are sinners. We saw from Genesis #9 that government has this right and responsibility to administer justice, even up to the death penalty. Now we shall see what we can learn from God's dealings with Israel.

I.

From the first three verses of Genesis #12, we learn that GOD HAS A SPECIAL PLACE FOR ISRAEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD HAS A SPECIAL...) Last week we saw from Genesis #9 that Noah and his family survived the flood and were commanded by God to repopulate the earth. In #11 there is the story of the tower of Babel and the confusion of

the languages. Chapter 10 describes the descendants of Noah and his family. The descendants of Noah's son Shem end up with Abram and his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, who come from Ur of the Chaldees.

The Lord chooses to bless Abram as the result of his sovereign and gracious choice. In Joshua #24 v. 2 (JOSHUA 24:2) we are told, **“And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your father lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.’”** Abram and his family were not even followers of the true God. Yet God chose to bless them. Such is the nature of God's gracious and sovereign choice.

We read in the first three verses of Genesis #12: **“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”** (PROJECTOR OFF) Abram is commanded to do two things: To leave his country and go to a certain land and to be a blessing.

It required an act of faith on Abram's part to leave familiar territory and people and to go to a land he had never seen. He will find the land of Canaan occupied by pagan people. He will also find a land plagued by famine. Historians and archaeologists say that there was a long period of dryness in Canaan which resulted in a drop in the population of the area about the time of Abram. Perhaps God was sovereignly clearing the land for Abraham and his descendants to be able to occupy it.

Notice the blessings which are promised to Abram. His descendants will become a great nation, he will experience God's blessing, he will acquire a great name, he will be blessed by those who bless him, those who curse him will be cursed, and he will ultimately be a source of blessing to all the peoples of the earth. His one minor problem is that he and his wife have no children, and they are growing old. Abram's faith will be challenged by having a barren wife and facing a barren land.

Yet there is a promise of great blessing, including the assurance that all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. Thirteen centuries later the prophet Isaiah (ISAIAH 49:6) will record this prophecy: **“[God] says, ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’”** The prophet Isaiah is describing a coming Messiah who will be a blessing to all of the nations of the world. The original promise to Abram that he would be a blessing to all of the families of the earth will find fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Notice also the one curse in these promises to Abram. God will curse those who curse Abram. Here is the lesson for any good national government. (PROJECTOR OFF) Wise governments will treat the descendants of Abram well. That doesn't mean that a

national government needs to agree with every policy position of the nation of Israel. It doesn't mean that there won't be bad Jewish people who need to be subject to justice. But it does mean that the sovereign God of the universe has a special love and interest in the Jewish people. Nations who want to experience God's favor will keep that in mind.

There are no doubt many reasons why our country has experienced much prosperity. But we should remember the fact that the United States has been a friend to the nation of Israel since its founding in 1948. Since the United Nations came into existence the US government on 43 occasions has vetoed Security Council resolutions that have gone against the state of Israel. At times the US has been alone in its support of Israel. In the grand scheme of things I suspect that this means something to the sovereign Ruler of the universe.

The promise of God to Abram still applies. We need only to look at history to see what happened to Nazi Germany, what happened to the Arab nations who attacked Israel in 1948, what happened to the Arab coalitions in 1967 and 1973, and what is happening to the Muslim radicals in the Gaza Strip today. Good civil government will remember God's promise to the descendants of Abraham.

II.

From Genesis #15 vv. 7-21 we find that GOD DEALS WITH PEOPLE ON THE BASIS OF COVENANTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD DEALS WITH PEOPLE...) Abram, who will become Abraham, rescued his nephew Lot from a confederation of city-states which had invaded their region. At the beginning of #15 Abram is fearful that these northerners will return looking for him. God repeats His promises from #12.

Beginning in v. 7 we read, **“And he said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.’ 8 But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ 9 He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.**

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 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. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give[a] this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.'"

Thus the Lord elaborates upon His earlier promises. There will be an oppression of 400 years for his descendants. But after that they will occupy the land of Canaan. Their kingdom will eventually extend from Egypt to the Euphrates River.

There are two additional things to notice about this passage. One is that Abraham's descendants will be governed by a covenant, an agreement, a constitution with God who will function as their political leader. The Ancient Near East was familiar with these covenants between rulers and between tribes and perhaps between wealthy individuals. Animals were cut in half, and the parties to the agreement walked between them. The literal Hebrew terminology for making this agreement is "to cut a covenant." The division of the animals signified that any party who broke the covenant was to suffer the fate of the divided animals.

In this situation birds of prey try to attack these animal corpses. Abram drives them away. Perhaps these birds symbolize other people groups who will try to disrupt this agreement.

This covenant signing ceremony is unique in that Adam does not pass through the divided animal parts. God manifests Himself in the form of a smoking oven, and He alone passes between the animals. Thus the Lord signifies that fulfillment of the covenant is dependent upon Him alone. This is an unconditional covenant. It is certain to be fulfilled, because God will see to it.

The other thing to notice here is that in v. 14 and v. 16 God says that He will hold nations accountable for their wrongdoing. In v. 16 He says that the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. The Amorites were the occupants of the land of Canaan. It will be over 400 more years before their judgment will come.

We may wonder why the Lord does not more quickly judge the evil regimes of China and North Korea and Venezuela. We are reminded here that God sees the evil that bad kingdoms do. It just may not be in the time frame that we would desire that He intervenes with earthly judgment. At the same time we should have concern for our own nation. We cannot indefinitely flout God's moral laws and expect that the sovereign ruler of the universe will not also hold us accountable.

III.

In Genesis 17:9-14 we find that GOD'S COVENANTS HAVE CITIZEN RESPONSIBILITIES. (III. GOD'S COVENANTS HAVE...) The Abrahamic covenant is

unconditional. Its promises are sure to be fulfilled. But for the descendants of Abraham to individually benefit from the promised blessings, there is a certain responsibility.

In vv. 9-14 of #17 in Genesis we read, **“And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.’”**

This ritual was a kind of loyalty oath, a pledge to participate in the covenant. It may seem strange to us, but the treatment involving the male sexual organ pointed to the promise of lots of kids. At this point, it was still a matter of faith for Abraham. For he did not have any children yet.

Abraham and Sarah did have a clan. It was composed of servants and hired people and perhaps extended relatives. It was certainly not a nation in any way in which we would recognize it. But it will grow and will eventually become a nation. At this point the clan is governed by God through a covenant. It seems to be fairly simple. The men of this clan are simply called upon to practice circumcision.

Other nations will eventually have covenants of sorts. We have the US Constitution which governs the basic operation of our nation. It has been pretty effective for the past 250 years. Countries with bad governments tend to have covenants, or constitutions, that change frequently, or disappear altogether. In China in 2018 the Communist Party voted to end the two term limit for presidents so that Xi Jinping could rule indefinitely. The vote in the party congress for this constitutional change was a squeaker, 2958-2. I wonder what happened to the two who voted against it. This past July a similar thing happened in Russia. There was a national referendum whereby Vladimir Putin was allowed to continue as president until 2036. Opponents claimed that the vote was rigged. Of course in Russia only the government is allowed to control the media.

We have various ways in our country to express loyalty to our founding covenant. People who take government office and who join our military take an oath, promising loyalty to our Constitution. There is also the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem. I suspect that there is value in this, especially when there is recognition that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God.

We Christians have citizenship in another kingdom and our ultimate loyalty belongs to another ruler. We have a means of expressing our commitment to that ruler and to His

covenant. It involves the Lord's Supper. (1 CORINTHIANS 11:25) In 1 Corinthians #11 v. 25 the Apostle Paul writes, **"In the same way also he [Jesus] took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"** God's covenants have citizen responsibilities.

IV.

Next, we find that GOD ESTABLISHES A MODEL KINGDOM. (IV. GOD ESTABLISHES A MODEL KINGDOM) We are making another large time jump in the Biblical record. We are moving forward some 500 years. Abraham eventually did have the promised child through Sarah. He was Isaac. Isaac had two children by Rebekah. They were Jacob and Esau. Jacob was the one through whom the special promises to Abraham would be fulfilled.

Jacob had twelve sons, who became leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was one of those sons. He was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. God providentially raised up Joseph to become the number two official in all of Egypt. When a famine in Canaan forced Jacob's family to turn to Egypt for help, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. The whole family was brought down to the Nile delta. That is where they lived for the next 400 years. They grew and became numerous.

Toward the end of that time the Egyptian pharaohs felt threatened by the Hebrews. So they forced them into slavery. God raised up Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt. Most of you remember the story about how God brought ten plagues upon the land. In the last one the oldest son in every family was killed. The Hebrews were protected by the ritual that became the basis for the Passover observance. The Hebrews left Egypt. Pharaoh changed his mind in letting them go and pursued them to the Red Sea. His army was wiped out when they tried to pursue the fleeing Hebrews through the Red Sea. In the third month after their escape they arrived at Mt. Sinai. There the Lord had an important meeting with them.

We pick up the story in vv. 5 & 6 of Exodus #19 (p. 60). God told the people through Moses, **"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."**

Notice that the word "covenant" appears again. Notice also that there is an "if" that appears before mention of the covenant. Unlike the covenant with Abraham, there are conditions attached to this covenant. If Israel follows this covenant, certain blessings will follow. The Abrahamic covenant is certain to be fulfilled. But the benefits to any one generation will be dependent upon following this covenant at Mt. Sinai.

This, in most ways, marks the real beginning of the nation of Israel. The governing documents for the nation are about to be explained. A structure for civil government is about to be established. There will be directions concerning laws and a justice system and taxes.

The unique thing about this civil government which is being established is that the Lord God is its head. He is the king. He is the president. The Lord God will now have a twofold relationship with the Hebrews. He will be their political leader, and He will continue to be their spiritual leader. There will be certain material benefits which will follow from adhering to His civil administration. We will see later that there is the promise of physical prosperity and success over enemies. These are not the same as spiritual benefits. It will be theoretically possible for Hebrews to be good citizens while at the same time being spiritually lost and headed for hell.

Look next at vv. 7 & 8 in Exodus 19: **“So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.”** So here is the consent of the governed. There is a popular referendum. The people recognize that this is a good arrangement and vote their approval. The descendants of Abraham have an opportunity offered to no other nation in the world. They will actually have God as their ruler. The Hebrews will have an opportunity to witness to the other nations of the world about the true God. They will also have the opportunity to display what good civil government looks like. What will be necessary is a cooperative citizenry. Unfortunately the outcome will not be so good.

To be good citizens the Israelites must learn that they need to have a personal and spiritual relationship with YHWH, the God and Ruler of Israel. For He is not just their King. He is also their Creator and Redeemer and ultimate Judge. That is also what we must learn. The best citizens are those who have a personal relationship with the true God, who is the sovereign ruler of all of the earth.

In our discussion of covenants in Genesis #15 I started at v. 7. It is probably important that we look at the verse which preceded that. The context involved here is that Abram had just rescued Lot from a much larger northern army. The next spring he is concerned that this northern army is going to come looking for him. Abram is also painfully aware that he has no children, though he has been promised that his descendants will form a great nation. So the Lord takes him outside at night and tells him to look up at the sky and to start counting the stars.

It is then that we encounter v. 6. (GENESIS 15:6) **“And he [Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”** It was a trusting faith in God and His revelation which resulted in a declaration of righteousness from the only Judge who ultimately matters. The Apostle Paul will quote this verse in the New Testament to show that it is trusting faith in the true God and His revelation which results in eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. This is the consistent teaching throughout the Scriptures.

Today the content of that faith includes recognition that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who became a human being. He was fully God and fully human. He died on the cross to satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God. Because He was a human being,

he could serve as our representative. Because He was God His sacrifice had universal benefit. The one responsibility which we have to enter into this benefit is to believe in Jesus. "And Abram believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."