

A Good and Hard Covenant

The Life of Abraham: A Study in Genesis 12-22 Sermon 5

Genesis 15:7-21

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For a long time, I mistook *hard* to be the opposite of *good*. I thought that if something was good, it must be easy, enjoyable, immediate. But hard, difficult, and delayed, these things had to be incompatible with something being good. *Have you ever made that mistake—thinking that hard is incompatible with good?*

I've come to see how often *good* requires *hard*. Take learning a musical instrument: if you learn to play the piano, that's a good thing; and if you learn to play the piano, that's a hard thing. Or take getting in shape—a good thing, but very hard. And what about building a healthy relationship—good, but hard. Or how often do I remember one of my parents saying to me as a child, when being disciplined for something, "I know this is hard, but it's for your own good."

Hard is not incompatible with good. In many cases, hard is an integral part of something becoming deeply good.

It's crucial to understand that good and hard are not opposites when we come to the basic message of the Bible. At the center of the Bible's plotline is the announcement of *good news*. God has something *good* to say to the world through His Son, Jesus, something very good.

But we are mistaken if we think that good news, is easy news. Quite the contrary, the good news of scripture comes with some very hard news. If you want to embrace the good news that you've been forgiven, you must also embrace the hard news that you needed it.

Notice this pattern across scripture—how good news and hard news go hand-in-hand:

Jesus announces the arrival of God's kingdom: **good news**. But then follows with the command, "repent," meaning entirely flee from your former way of life: **hard news**. (see Mark 1:15).

Jesus forgives a woman of her sins: **good news**. But only to tell her, “go, and sin no more”:
hard news (see John 8:10-11).

Jesus invites people to come and follow him, promising true life: **good news**. But then adds, “deny yourself and take up your cross”: **hard news** (compare John 10:10 and Mark 8:34)

Jesus says, “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33): **good news**. But also says to his followers: “I am sending you into the world as sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16):
hard news.

This is an unmistakable pattern in scripture: *God’s good news often involves hard news*. What I want to help us see today is why this is not bad news.

This pattern comes to the fore in our passage today in Genesis 15:7-21. Here, God makes a covenant with Abraham, securing his future inheritance of the Promised Land. And God secures this covenant on the honor of his own integrity. So, for Abraham, this is very good news. But there is also an announcement made during the covenant that is very hard news—news involving delay and almost unimaginable difficulty in Abraham’s family’s future.

I want to move about in this passage to help us see both (1) the good news and (2) the hard news of the covenant. But ultimately, (3) I want us to see how it is the case that the hard news is actually *integral* to the good news—and consider what this means for God’s people today.

I. The Good News (vv.7-10, 17-21)

Last week we saw that the focus of Genesis 15:1-6 is about reassurance—in those verses God reassures Abraham that he will have a child. That theme of reassurance continues in verses 7-21, but now God reassures Abraham he will inherit the land:

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” (15:7).

Abraham’s question in verse 8 sets the stage for the rest of the passage:

O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it? (15:8)

This is not, I don't think, Abraham expressing doubt—after all, his faith has just been extolled in 15:6. This question is more like Mary's question after the angel Gabriel announces she'll be with child: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). "*How will my possessing of all this land—currently filled with all these warring tribes—come about?*" Abraham wonders.

The Covenant

God answers by making a covenant with Abraham. Like a modern-day contract, a covenant is an agreement between two parties that is legally binding. But a covenant is also more than this: it has a relational component that often brings two parties into a family-like relationship. Through this covenant, God binds Himself and bonds Himself to Abraham and Abraham's future.

What do we make of the gathering and cutting of the animals in verses 9-10? This is strange to us, but it was a common practice in Abraham's time, and its meaning is straightforward.

In an ancient covenant ceremony, animals would often be cut in two and the parties making the contract would pass between them. The parties walking between the animals are saying to themselves and each other "If I betray this agreement may I die a horrible death like these animals."¹

What's striking here is that although Abraham prepares the animals in verses 10-11, it's not Abraham who walks between them in verse 17. Instead, we read,

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. (15:17).

We find these features strange, but to an Israelite, they would know what this referred to. Just as God appears to Moses in a burning bush and leads Israel through the wilderness as a pillar of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night, so too, God appears here as smoke and fire, walking between the severed animals.

And this means—and this brings us to the incredibly good news of the covenant—God alone takes responsibility for seeing this promise through. God is saying, in effect, *let me become like one of these severed animals if I don't keep my word to Abraham*.

It's hard not to see foreshadowing here for how the Good News of the Gospel unfolds. There, Jesus pays the penalty for all the ways we haven't lived up to our duty towards God—our duty to love Him and love what He's created. On the cross, God does take on the curse of humanity breaking His covenant; on the cross, God does become the slain animal carcass—"the lamb who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29; see also Revelation 5:6).

This is the good news of the covenant God makes with Abraham: God not only promises to give Abraham the land; He enters into a contract—a binding covenant—saying He'll be the guilty party if this promise is not kept.

But here is where we need to explore what happens between Abraham's arranging of the animals and God walking between them. There is an interlude in verses 12-16, where a deep darkness and sleep come upon Abraham. And in this mysterious scene, we find added to the good news of the covenant, some very hard news.

II. The Hard News (vv. 12-16)

In these verses, it seems that God is explaining the process by which Abraham's descendants will come to possess the land. He says to Abraham:

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.... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete (15:13-26).

Yes, Abraham, your descendants will have the land. But first, your offspring will be displaced for 400 years; second, they will be slaves; and third, they will be inhumanly and tyrannically treated.²

I think a modern person—tutored by mantras like YOLO (you only live once) and FOMO (fear of missing out)—would be crushed by this covenant. What if God said to you: *I have the most wonderful future planned for you and your family (or you and your church). And it will come about through great delay and tremendous loss and no small amount of injustice.*

For modern people, difficulty and delay feel incompatible with good: This level of *hard*, cannot be *good*.

But this is the word that comes to Abraham. And I want to spend the rest of our time asking how it is the case, that this hard news is not only compatible with the good news but integral to it. In the passage itself, God hints at two ways this is the case.

III. How Hard Becomes Good in God's Economy (vv. 14, 16)

1. God's promises unfold through difficulty because that's how God forms US.

God foretells of Israel's centuries-long bondage in Egypt in this passage, but in verse 14 says it will come to an end:

But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions (15:14).

This language of deliverance (I will bring you out) and prosperity (you shall come out with great possessions) strikes an important note: God is going to work something good through the furnace of captivity. The season in Egypt is strategic. Consider just a few things that happen through Israel's sojourn in Egypt:

Abraham's great-grandson is the first to be taken captive there, and because his brothers betrayed him. But as the story unfolds, Joseph ends up in power in Egypt. And through his God-given insight, Joseph single-handedly creates a way to preserve Egypt and his father's family during a crushing famine in Egypt and Canaan. Scripture makes clear that without Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt, Israel would have ceased to exist before she ever really got started:

“You meant evil against me,” Joseph famously says to his brothers. “But God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20).

Next, consider the remarkable growth of Israel in Egypt. They multiply so fast that Pharaoh tries to stop it in Exodus chapter 1, but cannot (“the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied,” Exodus 1:12). Israel was just a tiny band of 70 people when they go down to Egypt at the end of Genesis, but while there they grow into a nation of tens of thousands.

Consider that when God delivers them, they are given treasures of Egypt, and so much so we read that the Israelites “plundered the Egyptians” (Exodus 12:36). And consider that through their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, they came to know God not only as their provider but as their deliverer, their savior.

Through the Exodus, God reveals His strong arm to save, and sets the paradigm for all of us: **God brings life out of death.** None of this is to justify the horrors done to Israel in Egypt. Rather, it is to point out that under God’s sovereign plan, the furnace of affliction became the furnace of formation.

And this a lesson we must embrace too. God’s people live today between God’s promises and their fulfillment. God has delivered us from our slavery to sin and death through the Cross of Jesus Christ. But we await Christ’s return, when he will make all things new, delivering our physical bodies and the physical world from its decay.

And scripture is clear that the church will sojourn through its own tribulations as it awaits the completion of God’s promises—just as Abraham’s people did. And the individual Christian, along with the blessing of life and the Holy Spirit, will also face sufferings and hardships as she awaits the completion of God’s promises.

The covenant with Abraham includes this hard news with the good news so that we do not lose heart when things are hard—so that we do not mistake current hardships as arbitrary but come to believe God is at work, even in the furnace of captivity.

2. God's promises unfold slowly because He's seeking to bring more people into the Covenant.

A second reason for the hard news surfaces in verse 16. There, the Lord explains a reason for the delay of 400 years:

And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. (15:16).

This verse foreshadows the conquest of the Promised Land enacted under the leadership of Joshua. God is explaining now that we are not to think this is unjust. Rather, just as God will use Assyria and Babylon to bring the judgment of sinful Israel in the centuries to come, He will use Israel as an instrument for justice when He drives the Amorites out of the land four hundred years from now.

The sins of the Amorites are notorious, in both the Bible and the chronicles of the historians. Many are too grotesque to mention aloud. When Israel is about to enter the Promised Land and displace the Amorites, we hear in Leviticus:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants (Leviticus 18:24).

This requires us to step back and remember the bigger drama unfolding in scripture. Remember that in Genesis we see humanity rebel against God and choose their own way (Genesis 3). Before the flood, we read that "the whole earth was corrupt and all flesh had corrupted their way" (Genesis 6), and even after the flood we hear of "man's heart being evil from youth" (Genesis 8:21).

Because of our sinful neglect of God and God's ways, judgment is tied up with the completion of God's plans. God cannot bring about a perfect world, without bringing about perfect justice. And the placement of Israel in the Promised Land is like a parable for the placement of God's people in the whole world: the full arrival of God with His people (which is the real promise), will coincide with the full judgment of all that is sinful and wrong.

The 400-year delay foretold in Genesis 15 is a window into how God's justice and mercy works: God will not lift a finger to judge until it is just: until "sin has reached its completion" (v. 15). And God is patient with sinners, urging that we would turn to find forgiveness.

In God's delay, we are to see God's mercy.

This is the same with Christ. Christians await Christ's return, which will bring to completion God's good promises. But that return also means the completion of God's justice. We say this every Sunday in the Creed: "He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

Christians have been living through a 2000-year delay since the first coming of Christ. And it's hard. Delay is hard. But do you see how this covenant with Abraham helps us see that delay, although hard, is not bad—it's part of something good: God's patient kindness and mercy.

Paul says that God's "forbearance and patience" are His "kindness and meant to lead you to repentance (Romans 2:4)

Peter adds,

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Do you know what's going on in the world right now? God is patiently waiting before His son returns so that more people can be brought into his family. This is at the very core of reality.

And do you know what this means for you and me—who know Christ, who are part of his covenant people? It means that in these days that feel hard or filled with delay, God is actually creating space for us to introduce people to Jesus on the Cross before they stand before Jesus on the Throne.

A great place to introduce someone to Jesus on the Cross is to invite them to church on a Sunday. Or to ask them to read *Mere Christianity* with you this year. Or to include them in a cookout with your small group.

The experience of hard difficulty, dear Christian, may turn out to be the pressure of good formation; the experience of hard delay, dear friend, may be your taste of the good mercy and patience of God.

Let us learn with Abraham; in the economy of God, hard news is far from incompatible with good news. In fact, it may be in and through the *hard* that we come to more deeply know and taste, how God is so *good*.

Endnotes

1. Tremper Longman, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 204.
2. John Calvin writes at this juncture of the covenant: “Wherefore the faith of Abram was admirable and singular; seeing that he acquiesced in an oracle so sorrowful, and felt assured, that God would be his Deliverer, after his miseries had proceeded to their greatest height.” See John Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 1, 415.