

EPISODE 2

COVENANT (& CURSE)

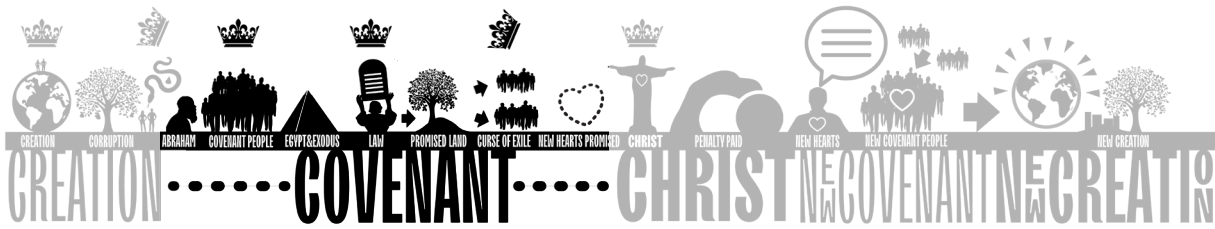
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They call it Murphy's Law. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. God made a good world, and humanity in his image - but our inclination to doubt God's promises and make our own definition of 'goodness' led to all kinds of evil instead. Cain, the first son, became the first murderer. Sin and violence spread everywhere. God washed the world clean and started again with Noah, but the heart problem was exactly the same. By Genesis 11 (at the tower of Babel), humanity wants to build a tower to heaven to 'make a name for themselves' rather than glorifying God. It's all backwards. So instead of 'living the dream', the world is 'living the curse.'

THOUGHT STARTER

What tensions can you see in today's world between 'living the dream' and 'living the curse'? What's wrong with the world?





A NEW BEGINNING - GOD'S COVENANT IN GENESIS 12

1. Read Genesis 12 (sidebar). In the world of curse, what is God offering as an alternative? (Use dot points and look for at least three different aspects of the answer.)

2. While the promises are first for Abraham's descendants (the nation of Israel), where do people like us fit in?

Time passes. The 'covenant promises' of God seem so distant, and so unlikely to come about. But God will not abandon his promises, even if they take a very long time to be fulfilled. *Read Genesis 18* (sidebar) to get a sense of both the tension, and the potential in the air.

3. From verse 18, what is God's ultimate intention through this promised family line?

4. Look carefully at verse 19. What is Abraham's role and responsibility? Is the covenant contingent? (In other words, what if they don't do their part?)

NEXT STEPS - SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND COVENANT LAWS



Here's the plan: uniquely among the nations, Abraham's descendants will stand out as the image of God's original idea of goodness; they'll do what is right and just, even if nobody else follows their example. But what exactly will that look like?

COVENANT DEFINED

A covenant is like a contract or pact. In ancient times, treaties between nations were in the form of 'covenants', which had a similar form to sections of the Old Testament. These days, marriage is a good example of a covenant.

It might not seem like much at first glance, but from one man, God offers a re-start for all humanity. *Read Genesis 12* (below).

GENESIS 12

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."² "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

GENESIS 18

18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

DEUTERONOMY 4

5 See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.⁶ Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."⁷ What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?⁹ Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them...

25 After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing his anger,²⁶ I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed.²⁷ The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you.²⁸ There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell.²⁹ But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.³⁰ When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him.³¹ For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.

Fast forward 400 years or so, and let's see how things have played out. Abraham and Sarah finally have a son, Isaac. Isaac has a son Jacob, otherwise known as "Israel," and Israel produces twelve virile tribes. They settle in a patch of the "promised land" (see Genesis 12) but in a long and complex story, find themselves living in Egypt due to a famine.

Things in Egypt start well, because younger brother Joseph has been sent on before them and now has a leading role in the nation. But a few generations later, the book of Exodus finds the descendants of Israel growing exponentially, and the new Egyptian Pharaoh oppressing them. God calls Moses to lead them back to freedom in the promised land. Then he gives them the covenant law (including the famous 10 Commandments) to show them how to properly display his goodness (Exodus 19-24) and do what's right and just when they're back in the promised land. Remember, that's what Abraham's descendants have been chosen to do!

The book of Deuteronomy records the final speeches of Moses as the people of Israel approach the promised land. It's full of both promises and warnings!

5. Read Deuteronomy 4 (sidebar). How will Israel fulfil their original brief of doing what's right and just? How will this impact the surrounding nations?

6. What if they don't comply? (v25-31)

These verses give a glimpse of two possible futures. The good news is, they both end with God's relentless commitment to show mercy to his chosen "covenant people." It's just that one path is much more painful. As you keep reading in the Old Testament, it's good to keep in mind the question, "Which path will Israel choose?"...

7. Have a look at Deuteronomy 28:1-6,15-20 (sidebar), for a glimpse of the two options in this 'pick a path' adventure. How would you summarise the options?

Imagine the 'worst case scenario.' If (or when) the descendants of Abraham turn away to follow other gods and abandon God's law, the land of promise they're about to enter and possess will end up a smoking ruin. They'll be smashed and scattered everywhere.

Now read Deuteronomy 30:1-6.

8. Even when the worst things happen for Israel, what will

they need to do when it all goes bad? What will God do for them then?

9. Note the two references to their “hearts.” It seems to be a circular argument! What Israelite will ever turn back to God and be wholeheartedly obedient? (Hold this question in your mind for the next Episode!)

The long story of the Bible (see below) is actually all about human hearts, and their failure to love and serve God! Even as he delivers the first covenant, Moses looks forward to a new covenant of “circumcised hearts”. Much later (after everything goes wrong) the prophets Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:24-28) have the same hope, for a new covenant that actually changes hearts. By giving people his own Spirit, God will change ‘hearts of stone’ to ‘hearts of flesh’ — hearts that willingly serve him.

A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS...

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The Old Testament traces Israel’s failure to keep the covenant God gave them so that they (and then the rest of the world) could be blessed. No matter what God does to help, their hearts remain relentlessly sinful. As the story unfolds, God gives priests to make sacrifices on their behalf, excusing them from being punished for their sins (Leviticus). But the priests are sinful too, and the whole system is corrupted (e.g. Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 6-7, Hosea 8, Amos 4-5, Micah 6, Malachi 1). When Israel turns to other gods, God punishes them, then saves them, so they’ll turn back to him (Judges). But nothing changes their hearts, and they go straight back to their other gods. God gives them Kings in the line of David (1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings), so that if the king loves God from the heart he can lead the nation to do the same, bringing blessing to the whole world (see especially Psalm 72). But of course the kings are sinful too, and the monarchy ends up leading Israel into sin and punishment, not away from it (see especially Psalm 89). What a disappointment! Under King Solomon, Israel is split by civil war. Ten northern tribes keep the name “Israel”, while the two southern tribes (centred on Jerusalem) take the name “Judah”.

In the year 722BC, the ten northern tribes of Israel are crushed and taken into exile by Syria. In the year 587BC, the two southern tribes are crushed and taken into exile to Babylon. Seventy years later, they’re allowed to return. But only few come back to rebuild in Judea. Things are never the same. The Romans occupy Judea after the first Roman-Jewish war in 70BC, while the ten northern tribes have virtually disappeared, intermarried with other tribes around Samaria, or scattered around the Mediterranean world. If God is somehow going to regather his ‘Israel’ and give them new hearts. He is facing quite a challenge! We’ll see how it happens in Episode 3.

OPTION 1

DEUTERONOMY 28

1 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.² All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.⁴ The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.⁵ Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

OPTION 2

DEUTERONOMY 28

15 However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:¹⁶ You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.¹⁷ Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.¹⁸ The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.¹⁹ You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.²⁰ The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him.