

Our covenant privileges

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, who is the most important person you've ever met in your life? Have you ever met a rugby captain, been to one of those rugby breakfasts? Sia Khaleesi would be cool to meet him at the moment.

What about a celebrity, you know? I don't know. They come to Cape Town every now and then. My brother works in the acting industry, in the film industry. And every now and then he's had the unlucky privilege, he calls it, of driving some celebrities around Cape Town.

What about the Queen of England? I've had the chance of meeting the Queen. Do I win? Now, she doesn't know my name, but that's okay. She met a lot of us at the time.

I went to go play for her 90th birthday. It's an interesting thing when you meet the Queen. You've got to be on your best behavior, obviously. You don't get to speak to her unless she speaks to you. And for some reason, your shoes and your buttons have become very important. I don't think my shoes have ever had that much attention. And one of the buttons, we wear a uniform, on my tunic was upside down.

[1 : 12] It had to be changed before I met the Queen. I was like, it's a button. No, no. Your buttons have to be shiny and must be all facing the right way. Well, welcome to our next installment of Genesis.

And the story of God's dealing with Abraham, but really which is about God's dealing with the world. Although Abraham is just a man, God is using him for really big things.

And the vehicle, I guess, the structure, the thing that God puts in place to effect that change is the covenant. And the main thing we're going to learn today is the incredible privileges that the covenant puts us in.

Us as God's covenant people, obviously dealing with Abraham first, but we're going to see how that plays out in our lives. We're going to learn one main thing about the covenant that it gives us as some lovely privileges, but, you know, two things about it.

We're going to learn that God's covenant people are the meeting place between God and the world, and that God's covenant people are the means of God's dealings with the world.

[2 : 19] He uses us to change the world effectively. And this puts us in an amazing privileged position with God. So you've got your Bibles open, and let's look at the story before us to see how these things play out.

That's an incredible story, isn't it? The Lord appearing to Abraham as he's sitting under the trees of Marmara. Marmara is in the middle of Israel, slightly south of Jerusalem.

I think it's called Hebron today. It's still a place you can go there. I've tried to find if the trees are still there. I'm not 100% sure they are. But there are trees that grow that age. The oldest trees in the world are between 3,000 and 5,000 years old.

It's amazing. Which, by the way, dates back to the flood. But, okay. Now, so there's Abraham sitting under the tree of Marmara, or the trees.

He's sitting by his tent. It's hot. It's kind of in the middle of the desert. And it's the heat of the day. And what you do in the middle of the day is you have a siesta. You finish your work for the day.

[3 : 24] And there's a long period in the middle of the day in the Middle East where you can't do any work because it's too hot. And Abraham sitting there in the shade of his tent. And he sees three men coming towards him.

Now, notice what Abraham does as he sees these three men. See the language it's used? Let's have a look from verse 2. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby.

When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them. And then he bows low to the ground. I wonder if he knows what's happening. He says, If I find favor in your eyes, my Lord,

do not pass your servant by.

So notice Abraham's language. Three words would you use. Humble. Polite. Let a little water be brought and then you may all wash your feet and rest under the tree.

Let me get you something to eat. Some translations have a little morsel. You can be refreshed and then go on your way. Now that you've come to your servant. So he wants to serve them and make sure that they receive something from him.

[4 : 30] Very well, they answered. Do as you say. And notice what Abraham does next. He doesn't just dawdle. Abraham hurried into the tent. Quick!

He said. Get three seers of fine flour. Okay? The best flour. And bake some bread. And he runs to the herd.

Selects a choice and tender calf. The best calf. Gave it to a servant who hurries to prepare it. And then he brings some curds and milk.

And the calf. And he sets them before the people. And then he stands by while they eat. So what's going on here? Well. Abraham realizes this is not just a normal visit.

He puts on a meal fit for a king. It's really a royal banquet. The stuff that he serves up to these three people. It's royal food. The best calf.

[5 : 28] The milk. And the curds. And the bread. And God himself is in this visit. It's really God and two angels.

We hear later on that you'll hear in the story that the two men left the Lord. At this stage we still think they're men. In chapter 19 we realize that they're actually angels. And that the one standing before Abraham is the Lord.

We find that in our own story. And so it's kind of like a royal visit by God himself. You know when royalty arrive they never visit you by themselves. They always come along with a whole bunch of people along with him.

So Abraham knows something special is going on. And after all you would expect something big when God visits earth. He's not just here to while away the time. God is here to do something. Now what does he do with Abraham when he visits? What is the thing that God is wanting to do with Abraham? Well he's going to confirm again the covenant promises that he's been making to Abraham and to Sarah the whole time.

[6 : 28] Remember we saw that or we've seen that ever since we started our series in well from Genesis 12. Just notice how God speaks to Sarah and what he deals with her about.

From verse 10. Well actually from verse 9 they ask about Sarah. Where is she? No she's in the tent. Verse 10. Now if you remember the story God promises them a son all the way back in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham.

Now Abraham was 75 at that time. He's now 99 or 100. It's 15 years later. He's getting on in years. In fact you know. Okay he's getting on in years.

So what does God say? No he's finally, finally, finally giving them the answer as to when they're going to have a son. So for 15 years. And we saw what they were trying to do with Sarah.

No I can't have a son. Here I have my servant Hagar. Let's try through that. And God blesses them with a son through Hagar. But that's still not quite God's plan. God wants Sarah to have a son.

[7 : 43] And here finally God tells him yes it'll be next year. Notice how Sarah responds. She laughs. Just like Abraham did in the last chapter.

You can almost understand that though can't you? What does she say? Verse 12. So Sarah laughed to herself. Well actually the narrator says Abraham and Sarah, verse 11, were already old and well advanced in years.

And Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Abraham, she's not far behind Abraham. Do we know her age? But it's, let's say she's older than 90. So she laughs.

After I'm worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure? But notice how God responds to Sarah's laughter. I mean she's laughing at the God of the universe.

He said what he's going to do. By this stage of the story they know that if God says something, he's going to do it. And then she laughs at him. How does God respond?

[8 : 44] Well, he calls her out. That's true. No, no. You laughed. No, I didn't laugh. No, you did laugh. But he doesn't get angry with her.

And he just calls her out. No, no. You did laugh. But he's very gracious. He doesn't respond in anger or curse or say, okay, you know what? You don't believe me. You're out of my promises.

Abraham and Hagar, there you go. You can have the child. God's made a promise. It's going to be Abraham and Sarah. And even though Abraham in chapter 18 doesn't quite get it, Sarah here in chapter 19 doesn't quite get it, that's okay.

They're in the covenant. God is going to use them. And he acts very graciously towards them. A key verse here, verse 14. Why did Sarah laugh?

Will I really have a child now that I'm old? God says, is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.

[9 : 45] Interesting word that. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Some translations have it, is anything too marvelous for the Lord? It's kind of two different words there really if you think about it.

The Hebrew is able to do that with these words. But what it means is it's going to be something totally amazing, something special or miraculous. That's what the word marvelous means.

That word marvelous, is it too hard? Is it too marvelous for the Lord? Is used of God's actions later on in the story of the Bible with Exodus. Remember God brings him out with mighty signs and miracles and wonders?

That word is marvelous. He brings him out with marvelous signs and wonders. And later on the same word is used in Psalm 118. Where the psalmist talks about, says that stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone.

You know that's talking about Jesus. The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes. It's the same word. So what that little word marvelous says there, is anything too difficult for the Lord?

[10 : 51] The answer is obviously no. Because God has all the power at the universe at his disposal and more. He's got infinite power at his disposal to make the things come true that he says he's going to do.

God is totally able to do anything he has promised to do. So it's got connotations of God is just going to give him a son.

But it's not just about Abraham and his son. There's something much bigger that God is going to do when he says, is anything too marvelous? When you use that word, you're expecting huge nation-changing historical events to happen.

And we see that that actually does work out in the life of Abraham and then later on in the life of the people of Israel. But in our lives as well. Now, something as important is going on here.

Do you ever wonder why did God choose old people to make his covenant with to get a son? Yes. He calls them when they're 75 and he waits 15 years until they're 100. Now, if we had made, I mean, silly to think like this, but imagine we're the ones making these promises.

[12 : 00] And now if I want people to have a son and a huge family, I'm not going to choose old people. I'm going to choose young people. You've got to give them a chance, you know. You've got to choose the right people. If you want to get stuff done.

Not if you're God. God makes promises to the wrong people. Why? It's quite simple. He wants to show them and through them, the rest of the world, how strong and able he is to get things done. And the opposite, how impossible it is for them to make the promises come true. You understand why he's doing that, right? That's why that little word marvelous is helpful. Because God does stuff that we're not able to do.

So he makes these huge promises to us, knowing that we are completely unable to make them come true, but that he will make them happen. Does that make sense? Now look at us.

Yeah. Us at St. Mark's. We're not exactly the right people. Who are we to do anything? Who are we that God should care about us?

[13 : 06] How can we do anything great for the Lord? How can we change the world? We don't have any power influence. Who's going to listen to us? Well, why would God choose us to get things done?

Well, what seems impossible for us is merely an opportunity for God to show his power and his strength and his abilities.

Notice, God is actually on his way to destroy Sodom. But he stops off at Abraham first. He didn't have to do that. He could have gone directly to Sodom and done what he needed to do.

In fact, he could have done it from heaven. He didn't actually have to come down and meet with Abraham and then later on have a whole discussion with Abraham. So God meets with his covenant people when he wants to get things done on planet Earth, if I can put it like that.

What does it mean for us, for the Christian church? Well, we are the connecting place between God and the world. We are the connecting place between God and the world.

[14:14] If I told you I could organize a meeting between you and God, would you believe me? I mean, I can't even organize a meeting between you and Sia Kulisi.

Well, I kind of can. Now, I've got to choose my words carefully, but I'm just being provocative for the... It's one of the things they teach you at college, you know, get people's attention.

If I could organize this meeting, how would you feel? Apprehensive? Excited? Well, the meeting place is called church.

What God does with Abraham in the Old Testament, going to meet him, because he's in covenant with God, Jesus promises to do in the New Testament.

Remember what Jesus says. It's Matthew chapter 18. You don't have to turn there. I'm just going to read it for us. You know it. Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth... This is Jesus talking to his disciples.

[15:17] Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything...

Sorry. If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.

If you would like to meet God, come to church next week. Was Jesus lying? Was he being over the top? Did he really mean it or did he not mean it? No, he really means it.

So the thing that God sets up to carry out his purposes in the world is the New Testament church. It's us. We are the meeting place between God and the world. One of the amazing promises we have in the New Testament is that we can meet the living creator God of the universe and that he meets with us.

God comes down to meet with us. He's not meeting the people in the malls on a Sunday. He's not meeting people out jogging or going to the beach or hiking. He's meeting with people who are in covenant with him.

[16:35] Just like he did with Abraham. He didn't meet with the people of Sodom. He met with Abraham and he spoke with Abraham. What does God do with us when he meets with us?

Well, he talks to us just like he did with Abraham. That's why we read his word. That's why our services are full of God's word.

It's God actually speaking to us. What do we hear every week when we meet? We hear that God is amazing. That he's done marvelous things.

That he's doing things that we can't do. We remind us that he's saved us. That he's risen again from the dead. That he gives us his Holy Spirit. We hear that he forgives us. We receive his blessing. He actually says nice things to us. He strengthens us with his Holy Spirit. Gives us the strength to carry on in our daily lives. He comforts us if we're going through hard times.

[17:30] And he also tells us to be loving to others. But then he gives us the power to do those things. So when we meet together at church, we receive blessing, encouragement, and hope.

And it's such a, you know, coming together at church on a Sunday, it seems like such a small thing. I mean, does God really change the world by us meeting together? Well, it seems that he does.

So that what we do here at church, we're elevated to a very high position. We kind of meet God. But really what happens is that God comes down to meet us. Isn't that a lovely thought to think about?

Now the second thing that happens really is the second part of the story. God is about to move off to Sodom. But he still has a few words to say to Abraham and something else is going on here.

So let's have a look at that. From verse 16. When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom. And Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.

[18:32] And the Lord said, then God says, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation. All nations on earth will be blessed through him.

For I've 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. The Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

God. God. Here's the other covenant privilege, I guess. God's covenant people are the means by which God works in the world.

God lets Abraham into the secret council of God. It's an amazing event. God reveals his mind to a mere human being. But again, he does this because he's included Abraham into his covenant. Abraham, because of the covenant, Abraham is no longer just any human being. He's an important human being. He's known by God. That little word chosen in verse 19.

[19 : 31] For I have chosen Abraham. Abraham, the Hebrew is I've known him. I know him. An incredible privileged position given to us in the covenant is for us to be known by God.

Then he chooses him to do a job. And essentially he chooses Abraham. Where Abraham becomes a sort of a representative, an intermediary between God and the world.

Now when I met the queen, I use that word loosely. She kind of walked past. She doesn't know my name. She doesn't know who I am.

I can't go to say, queen, you're not allowed to do that. And so I can't even get to speak to her. And if I did, she would be like, who are you? God knows Abraham.

So that when Abraham speaks to God, God says, oh, yes, Abraham. Yes, what is it? Oh, would you? Oh, yes, okay, no problem. It's important to be known by God. And the important thing here is that the covenant gives us that privilege and that right to speak to God and to be known by him.

[20 : 41] Can you see that in those verses? And then the next part of the story is even more incredible. This story just gets deeper and deeper. So God meets Abraham at the tree, has a lovely meal with him.

Sarah laughs at him. He says, yeah, you laugh, but that's okay. Then God tells Abraham what's on his mind. And then Abraham gets to speak to God and ask him to look out for the people of Sodom. Basically, he goes into bargaining mode with God. And God listens to him. Six times I go backwards and forwards. We have a human being bargaining, interceding really, with the God of the universe. But at the same time, God is incredibly gracious and lets Abraham ask him all these things. And then he responds to him. He actually listens to him. Now, how can this be?

Okay. It's because of the covenant. So, just to think about what the covenant does here for Abraham. God elevates Abraham to an amazing position of privilege.

[21 : 45] Being in a position to bargain for the life of the people of Sodom. And because of the covenant, Abraham becomes a source of blessing through intercessory prayer.

Now, you know what intercession means? We don't use it in everyday life, I guess. So, the dictionary definition, an intercessor is a person who intervenes on behalf of another person, especially by prayer.

They're a mediator. They're kind of like a negotiator. They're a go-between. They can help someone below them get what the person above them doesn't even know them.

And so, they connect the two. Again, just notice Abraham's attitude towards God as he speaks to him. How does he speak to God?

Well, to be honest, he does speak with boldness. What is the first thing he says? Verse 23.

Abraham approached the Lord and said, Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

[22 : 49] What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will you sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of 50 righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing. To kill the righteous with the wicked. Treating the righteous and the wicked alike.

Far be it from you. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Now, that's coming straight up into God's face. Yeah, slow down. Don't go and kill these people. It's very straightforward.

Funny enough, God himself has put Abraham into that position. Just notice, before Abraham speaks, verse 22, The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord.

That little dot, dot, dot. So, the men go away. God is still standing there. He's told Abraham what he's going to do. And he's kind of just waiting to see what Abraham will do. Then, boom, Abraham says, okay, come on, you've got to save these people.

You've got to do the right thing. Yes. Sorry, what? Are you trying to tell me what to do here?

[23 : 56] Of course, God is gracious back. Okay, I'll do it. And then the backwards and forwards. But what about 45? What about 30? What about 10?

Yes, yes, yes, I'll do it. Okay, no problem. But also, notice, Abraham is bold, but he's also humble and polite. Let's have a look. Verse 25, 27, and 30.

Okay, look. 25, we've done. 27. Verse 27. That Abraham spoke up again. Now that I've been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes.

What if the number of righteousness is five less than 50? Okay, he's being very humble towards God. Verse 30. He said, may the Lord not be angry, but let me speak.

What if only 30 can be found there? So it's interesting. God puts him in an amazing privileged position. There is boldness, but there's also humility and speaking, I guess, just being polite to God. [25 : 01] Abraham doesn't demand from God. None of this name it and claim it and just saying that God, claiming or telling God what to do. He's actually polite and he actually asks God.

Now, what about us? That's good for Abraham. Does God work with us in the same way? We're not Abraham. Can we intercede for people like Abraham does?

Is that our place? Does God still work through people in this way? Are we God's agents on earth? Well, short answer is yes. Because we're also in the covenant.

And so we've got the same rights and the same privileges that people like Abraham had. We've also received the blessing of Abraham. We're the nations that Genesis 12 talks about.

That God says in these verses we've just read. So now we are the people through whom the rest of the nations will receive God's blessing. God works through his people to get his will done.

[26 : 08] To do his job on earth. Does that make sense? Are you with me on that? Now, there's a very important section of the scripture that helps us understand this. I wonder, let's turn to Romans 10.

And I'm just going to read it and then you'll understand what it's saying. And then we'll spend the rest of our time looking at those New Testament passages. Romans 10 and from verse 11.

Now, we're in the middle of an argument that Paul is making. Really a similar point is that God first of all visited the Jews through Abraham. But what about the nations of the world?

Doesn't God care about them as well? Same question Abraham asks actually. Paul's answer is yes. No, he does care about them. But they've got to hear first. So this is what he says from verse 11. As the scripture says, anyone who trusts in him, in the Lord, will never be put to shame.

For there's no difference between Jew and Gentile. The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

[27 : 13] Can you see the continuity between what God is doing in the Old Testament with the job, well, the thing that he's doing with us Christians in the New Testament? How then can they call on the one they have not believed in?

And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

So it's a very important passage for us to get our heads around. That God saves through human agency, through words. Yes, through his words, but people have got to take his words and go and tell them to other people.

Yes, God himself could have changed history and come down and said his own words, but the covenant that he sets up puts us in that position for him. God, in a sense, accommodates himself. He binds himself to us as his agents on earth. We are his instruments of mercy and justice. And think about it. Who else is going to do the job of loving others and forgiving our enemies?

[28 : 19] You think the non-Christian world is trying to do those things? Or honor God or do the right thing? They don't care about those things. No, the covenant elevates us, Christians, to a position where we can be used by God to change the world.

And in Genesis 18, the way that that happens is through prayer. You think to yourself, okay, prayer, really, prayer. I don't know about you, but if you're like a normal Christian, prayer time in church is a chance to get five or ten minutes of sleep that you didn't get over the weekend.

But remember, God takes the things that are seemingly small and insignificant, and through the covenant elevates them to a very high standing, an incredible high standing significance that they wouldn't otherwise have.

Now, is prayer really powerful? Is it that effective? I don't like to say that prayer is powerful. You know, people say that. I like to say that the God we pray to is powerful to answer our prayers. Because God listens to his covenant people. Because he does, we should make work of being intercessors for our family, for our city, and for our world.

[29 : 28] We've been doing that this morning. Now, here's where faith comes in. Do you believe that God was listening to you? Well, first of all, do you believe that God is here? Yeah, I do.

That's why we meet. Now, it's not to say God can't meet you at other times. Of course he does. But he does it in a special way on church on a Sunday. When we meet together as a church, whether it's on a Sunday or another day, it's irrelevant.

And then when we've been praying to him, and we've asked him to forgive our sins and to bless our nation, has God listened to us? Do you believe that he has?

Yes. Of course he has. Because he said he would. Have a look again at Luke chapter 18. Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and never give up. It's always nice when the Bible tells you what it's actually trying to say. Okay, so there's the encouragement. Pray and never give up. You've got the story of the widow, the judge who doesn't care.

[30 : 31] I don't know. That's obviously not the God of the Bible, is it? We've got a God who does care. Yet he wants us to persist in prayer at the same time. Verse 5.

Yet because the widow kept bothering me, I will see, this judge says, that she gets justice. And verse 6, Jesus explains it. Listen to what the unjust judge says.

Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones? There's that little word chosen again. The people that he knows. Who cry out to him day and night.

Will he keep putting them off? No. No. But I tell you, he will see that they get justice. And quickly.

Now, again, is Jesus just using hyperbolic language?

Is he just shooting off the cuff? Or does he really mean what he says? No. He really means what he says. So, to summarize.

[31 : 33] We're in covenant with God. We are the meeting place between God and the world. So it immediately elevates us as Christians and what we do here on a Sunday. It's a hugely privileged position.

What does he do when he meets with us? He tells us what's on his mind. Now, he doesn't just, not just arbitrary words. It's actually in black and white. You can actually read it. And that's why we do spend time reading the Bible. He makes promises to us.

We know what he wants to achieve through the world. Yes, he'll judge the world for its evil. But he will also bring salvation. Not only that. But we are the means by which God works in the world.

And he charges us with making disciples. By telling, disciples of the nations, of the world. By telling them the gospel. And also to pray for them. What an amazing thing. We can change the history of the world.

And all we have to do is ask God. If we are God's agents, that makes us the most important people on planet Earth. We stand in between God and the world.

[32 : 41] Now, we don't look like anything special. God is in the business of taking things that don't seem like anything special. He makes a covenant with them. Then elevates them to the highest privilege possibly known to man.

We can ask things of God. And he listens to us. We have a huge privilege. But also a great responsibility. Let's take it seriously.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father. What a lovely story in Genesis 18. About how you came to visit Abraham and had a lovely meal with him.

And how even though Sarah laughed, you were sweet and kind and didn't judge them. And how you spoke to Abraham and let him know your plans. And that when he spoke to you, Lord, you listened and responded.

And what we've seen in the New Testament, that these promises are given to us, your people. And so we thank you for the amazing privilege of meeting with you Sunday by Sunday.

[33 : 47] And of the equally amazing privilege of having to speak to you, knowing that you listen to us and respond. Thank you in Jesus' name.

Amen.