

Covenant Consciousness

by Art Katz

Art Katz's sermon explores the profound relationship between creation and covenant, emphasizing God's initiative and the significance of these concepts in understanding our relationship with Him.

Duration: 53:47

Scripture: Genesis 1:3, Jeremiah 31:7, Matthew 6:33, Acts 9:3-9, Romans 8:22, Ephesians 1:9-10, Hebrews 9:15

Topics: "Covenant Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher quotes from Karl Barth, a Swiss German theologian, who emphasizes the inseparable connection between creation and covenant. According to Barth, God's act of creation is a gift and an expression of His love, with the purpose of establishing a covenant with His people. The preacher highlights that Israel is the first nation chosen by God and that the terms of the covenant are stated by Him. The sermon also emphasizes the significance of light in creation, as it represents God's will and the declaration of life.

Transcript

I'm starting this morning by quoting from Karl Barth, B-A-R-T-H, the great Swiss-German theologian, died about 1968, whose 13 or 14 volumes of Church Dogmatics is the summary of his lifetime thought, and a great figure, and this is one of those volumes. And he speaks of covenant out from creation. He goes back to the point of earliest beginning, that creation and covenant are inextricably linked.

That if God had no other reason to create, but to establish a format and a framework for the establishing of covenant, that would be sufficient ground. Because the heart of covenant is, I will be your God, and you will be my people. So there needs to be a necessity of people, and there needs to be a necessity of God who can honor that promise.

And in the declaration of this covenant, and its fulfillment, is the revelation of God himself, as he in fact is. If you don't see God in covenant, you don't see God. So, I'll quote, and we'll see where it leads us.

He speaks of creation as an incomparable act. We mustn't presume for the created order as if it's a matter of fact, and has necessarily to come. It's God's divine initiative.

He had no need for it. It only opened him to a whole assortment of problems and aggravations for which he could have been spared. Because he knew that with the advent of creation and of man, there would be

fallenness, there would be sin, transgression, and that his son himself would have to be the expiation of that sin.

And yet, he did not hesitate. So we need to respect the act of creation, which is under fire now, in all of the fervor about intelligent design and evolution. The modern world wants to deny God as creator.

But we need to cleave to this foundational concept, because everything issues from it. It's an act of God out of his own love and out of his own initiative, and makes possible covenant and all of the reality that follows. Though he is wholly self-sufficient, and absolutely glorious and blessed in his inner life, he did not have such will to be alone.

Covenant is relationship. Covenant is not a contract. I'll do this for you, and then you've got to do this for me.

It's the establishing of a relationship, and out of the appreciation of the relationship, and the love that it engenders, you keep the covenant. But your keeping of it is not its condition. You're not being rewarded for your keeping.

So, it's establishing a relationship between God and his people, in which he reveals himself as the faithful God of promise. I will. This is the freedom of his love, an act of the overflowing of his inward glory.

It says of the world that it received through an act of God, the reality, existence and form, which it did not have and could not therefore give itself, because it did not exist at all. This is not creation out of an accident, some collision in the heavens and some haphazard physiological thing with spectra. This is God's act.

It's the absolute gift of God. It is his good pleasure, free omnipotence of the divine love. The reality, elected and posited by this divine good pleasure, established and determined and limited by this omnipotence of his love.

God is love, and that love required creation. That he would not be alone. That there would be relationship and fellowship with his creatures.

And that that would be in a bond of covenant, by which he takes the initiative. Israel is only on the receiving side. The terms are stated by God.

He initiates covenant as he has initiated creation. We have only to accept it or to reject it. And we know that the rejection in the history of Israel has been costly and is costly to this day.

It's a slight against his love. So in the chapter on creation and covenant, he wants to make possible the history of God's covenant with man, which has its beginning, its center and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of history.

So it's not an exaggeration to say, God established creation in order to establish covenant. If he went that far, how significant the phenomenon is covenant, how much ought it to be esteemed, if it required the whole bringing into being that which was not, and opening to God all of the problems and weight of things that he need not have suffered, if he continued to choose to be alone. But the creation as the basis for covenant is the act of his love.

It's a first work. It's the covenant of grace for partnership in which he has predestined and called man. Man had to be created to be the object of covenant, and therefore to miss that identification and to live in independence of that covenant and the God who calls men to it is to live a fractured life, to be out of sorts, to be out of joint.

This is the normative intention of God, created man that he should be in covenant relationship with him, with a great promise, I will be your God, you will be my people. And at the end of the age, in Jeremiah 30, 31, this is exactly the statement that is reiterated in the new covenant that is everlasting. Creation sets the stage for the story of the covenant of grace.

It has everything to do with the triune Godhead and the agreement of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to God's enterprise with man in the world. So, there's a collaboration in heaven, so to speak, within the Godhead itself, about the fact of creation and its object, namely covenant with man, and that the Son himself will one day have to come as the mediator of that covenant and the bearer of the curse of the covenant. But knowing that, God did not withhold, nor did the Son, nor the Holy Spirit, so there's an agreement in the Godhead itself from the beginning for creation and its purpose.

We need to get back, you can't go back further than creation, but we need to go back to it in a sense of appreciation and esteem, or else it's dismissed as if it's a fact of life that has come in and of itself. No, it's a chosen act of God with the intention of blessing man. And the ultimate blessing, that I will be your God and you will be my people, is that we will be in union together and you will even share in my divinity and in my spirit and in my life.

And that will be the ultimate expression of the covenant blessedness for which you are intended. Of course, Israel is the first nation selected the first creation of God, and therefore the first work of his word was light and its separation from darkness. Only in its separation from light is darkness also created and therefore the creature of God.

The subject is natural light and natural darkness. Natural darkness as that which declares the reality which was rejected by God and has therefore vanished. And natural light as that which proclaims the will of God opposed to it.

It is natural light as such which is the irresistible and irrevocable declaration of life. So he goes back to creation and in the beginning God said, let there be light. And light came before the establishment of the luminaries.

That's the fourth act of God, is the creation of the moon and the stars which are just vehicles for the continuation of the expression of light. But light is God and that was invoked from the beginning. The first act of God, let there be light.

And light challenges the darkness. And it's in that light that we're called to live and walk and have our being. And even that, the creation of light is an act of grace, is a covenantal blessing for man.

That we should not wallow in darkness and have the light of life. The light that came upon Paul on the road to Damascus was brighter than the noonday sun. It was the original light that came with the first act of creation.

And in that light, Paul caught a glimpse of the Lord whom he had formerly persecuted and experienced a total revision of his understanding that made everything of the past to be as death and dust. It blinded him.

And I'm fond of saying that anyone who has received so superb an entree into the faith by which he became the chief apostle and to whom was given the great revelation of the mysteries of God and the mystery of Israel and the church, that we need to dwell on that revelation and that man as the source for the church of the profoundest kind for the last days.

Because he began in a light greater than the light of the noonday sun. It did not come by his speculation, by the operation of his own brilliant mind. It came by a flash of light from heaven in which he saw such things as affected everything for his apostolic and eternal future.

So what issues from him from that light should be for us the most commendable source of guidance for the last days. So Paul is suffering a kind of neglect as if he's some kind of strange creature and has his own thoughts and having no more credibility than others. No, he's foremost.

Because to no other apostle came such revelation, such apprehension on the road to Damascus as what he experienced. It's a light that we could ask for ourselves although we may at first have to suffer a blindness and languish for three days neither eating nor drinking as his life was reviewed beforehand and he forsook all the things that he had previously submitted as the leading student of the Rabbi Gamaliel. Talk about conversion.

The man was controverted. He was completely turned inside out and his whole understanding he saw in the face of Jesus the light of the glory of God. One glimpse of that face and that light changes everything.

We can't do more than to ask some measure of a revelation of that kind. Well I think we ought to look at the classicus locus which means the classic text on the subject of covenant is the Abrahamic covenant. Every covenant from the Noah right through to the new covenant is in some way an adumbration or development of what was initially given Abraham.

That's the centerpiece and in it are all the quintessential constitutive factors of covenant. So in Genesis 15 we need to dwell on that giving and see what it will teach us because there also is an issue of darkness and of light. I'm reading from the Amplified After these things the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision saying Fear not Abram I am your shield, your abundant compensation and your reward shall be exceedingly great.

And Abram said Lord God what can you give me since I am going on from this world childless and he who shall be the owner and heir of my house is the steward Eliezer of Damascus. And Abraham continued Look you have given me no child and a servant born in my house is my heir and behold the word of the Lord came to him saying this man shall not be your heir but he who shall come from your own body shall be your heir.

So everything begins with God speaking God taking the initiative God the creator and so the Lord said the word of the Lord came to Abraham Abram in a vision Fear not and then again in the fourth verse the word of the Lord came to him saying this man shall not be your heir and he brought him outside the tent into the starlight and said look now toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to number them then he said to him so shall your descendants be Abraham believed and trusted and relied on remained steadfast to the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness, right standing with God and he said to him I am the Lord who brought you out of all the coldies to give you this land as an inheritance but Abram said Lord God I will inherit it and he said to him bring to me a heifer

three years old, a she-goat three years old a ram three years old a turtle dove and a young pigeon and he brought him all these and cut them down the middle into halves and laid each half opposite the other but the birds he did not survive when the birds of prey swooped down upon the carcasses Abram drove them away when the sun was setting and the fear of great darkness assailed and oppressed him and God said to Abram know positively that your descendants will be strangers dwelling as temporary residents in a land that is not theirs and will be slaves there and they will be afflicted and oppressed for four hundred years but I will bring judgment on that nation whom they will serve and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions so this text is interspersed with a covenant

through pieces cut in half and then references to Israel's future history it's like a weave in a tapestry and we need to graciously, gently move through the fact that the sun went down and that Abraham was greatly afraid and a terror came over him what do you suppose that designates why would the establishment of the classic covenant which will be the pattern the template of all covenants including the concluding everlasting covenant invoke immediately a terror, a fear, a darkness birds falling on of prey falling on the carcass this is a remarkable drama this almost needs a Wagnerian musical backdrop to get the full drama of this this is not some light transaction this is if the heavens themselves are pulsating and trembling because something is being struck with the father of faith that

will affect all subsequent generations and the interesting thing is that Abraham himself does not pass through the pieces in a covenant of the classic kind where the word brith the name brith means a cutting there's a word for covenant the two partners who are in agreement pass through the cut pieces indicating that if either party fails they are making a bond unto death and they invoke upon themselves the death that is symbolized or expressed by these cut animals and yet God does not require Abraham to move through these pieces in fact as we learn he sleeps through the occasion and God himself alone walks through the pieces and that's already predictive of the everlasting covenant that I will make with you in those days and put my law in your hearts and every man will know me from the

least to the greatest as if this is all my baby your failure at covenant keeping is notorious but I'll establish a covenant that will be everlasting because I who give it will also keep it and I'm symbolizing and signifying that by walking through these pieces now but how can God himself then be a candidate to suffer the curse of a failed covenant what he's doing is implicating his son who will come as the mediator of the covenant to bear its curse and to fulfill the vengeance of the covenant by his own death and the shedding of his own blood that's why Jesus said at the Passover table at the Last Supper this is my blood given in the new covenant for you so dwell on this text the details of it are out of tune with our age so in verse 17 when the sun had gone down and a thick darkness had

come on lo, a smoking oven and a flaming torch passed between those pieces now on the same day the Lord made a covenant promise a pledge with Abram saying to your descendants I have given this land from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates the land of the Canaanites the Amorites the Canaanites so we need to note that the very first establishment of the covenant is not some airy and ethereal spiritual blessing although it is that but a concrete specific giving of land the land is a covenant provision of God for Abraham and for his descendants but the heck of it is you can't pass that land except as being in covenant with God if you're out of covenant you're candidates for expulsion and that's the expulsion that we anticipate and must necessarily come because in 1948 with the

establishment of the state of Israel through secular and socialist men there was not a fig of understanding of their own land and the political factors operative that they could go in and begin to establish that only

God could give and what could only be kept in covenant bond but we mustn't assume that because God works in history to enable a return of a sort that that is the fulfillment of his covenant purposes rather it's to show Israel in its failure cannot succeed independent of covenant relationship because in covenant relationship is the grace given to be to the stranger what we ought who is in the land and the treatment of the Palestinian is a clear indication that secular Israel was incapable of any relationship of that kind in fact their treatment was so harsh and often so unjust

that they think that their children that their children being living bonds is a just sacrifice there's a vehemence and a bitterness among the Palestinians for a history of slight being uprooted being mistreated having their lands taken misappropriated and various other intimidating acts by which Israel sought to maintain a control but could not be to the stranger in their midst what only a covenant grace would enable it's one thing to be to your own but to be to the stranger gracious and kind requires a grace from God and that grace is the expression of God given a covenant relationship with him he has seen to it that you cannot succeed independent of that covenant and so there's a short duration and maybe the intention of God is to indicate to Israel because what are we Jews but supreme

humanists that you cannot succeed independent of me you took a brave stab at it you transformed the malarial swampland you established a high tech civilization but in the end you precipitated your own destruction and now you will be cast out of the land and in your being cast out you may consider and repent and find your God and turn to him and he'll restore you to covenant and to the land as a covenant keeper so this is a drama of such proportions of course we desire a quick and easy solution the state has established it's not doing too well but it will improve but the issue of improvement is exactly the issue of humanism improvement implies that by human thought and ability prowess man can succeed in gradually altering his circumstance but what Israel has got to see is that the best of

our intentions will come back into our teeth and that we are reaching a humanly insoluble condition that without God we cannot remain in the land so he's this is a circuitous long route of a momentary historic return getting established in a way in which you think it a pity that those great cities have to be tumbled and the great towers of Tel Aviv have to come down and the great numbers of Ethiopian and Russian immigrants will be among the casualties of the devastation of the last days but so is the great cost that when Jesus comes two thirds of Israel have already perished and the one third must necessarily pass through the fire and be to him a restored remnant so this this touches last night's conversation how far will God go and what is at stake here is God's provision of Israel for

the nations that you're called to be a nation of priests and a light unto the world you're not called to be a success in yourself and to say look my no hands you're called to minister to the nations but only out of a brokenness of a people who learn their own sin and come to a place of contrition and are able to come to their former enemies and bring the knowledge of the mercy of God which they themselves have received after they have experienced his judgments so it's a costly training for a priestly nation but there's no shortcut and there's no shortcut for us and we we all we have a comparable calling and a comparable requirement to know the Lord through dealings that we can minister the reality of God not just as a correct doctrine but a reality tempted in our own life and experience

because that's what priesthood is the world is dying the world is in a substandard condition for the want of Israel's presence among the nations as a priestly nation you need to know that the great profanation that is sweeping the world the ugliness of culture the universality of its low taste is all a statement of the absence of a people called to teach the nations the difference between the sacred and the profane but the

heck of it is that there's hardly a more profane people on the earth today than Israelis themselves they are tattooed pockmarked engraved earrings stomach ring tongue ring nose ring they're freaking out their youth their generation everything that God says that Jews should not do should not be tattooed they do they're into the worst aspects of culture and even in

America the leaders of the rap music industry are Jews the entertainment industry all of the kinds of things that are degrading somehow have their emanation from us in our genius in our ability to find profit in it so we're functioning exactly in an opposite way to the divine intention and the world is paying the price I even have a secret theory about the root of anti-Semitism that it's an unconscious resentment on the part of the world of Israel's failure to be to the nations what we ought that somehow the world senses something wanting in that failure and it issues a resentment against that people and that will never be met again until Israel fulfills its destiny but to go from its present condition to that of a true priesthood will be through the road to Calvary and Isaiah 53 is not

only the description of the Lord's suffering it's a description of the suffering of the nation that will be marred more than any man and that they will have no beauty that any should desire them when they are expelled out from Israel and elsewhere in the nations and are hated and pursued they're going to experience and measure what came upon the Lord himself and in that suffering there'll be a recognition a glimmer oh for our transgressions he was stricken oh he went to the Lamb as a slaughter silently we're complaining and bellowing so what Israel has rejected because Isaiah 53 is not even included in the Shabbat uh Haftorah readings the Shabbat prophetic readings it's eliminated of course because it is so Christological that when I read it to my mother the first time she said where in

the she couldn't believe I was reading out of a classic Old Testament text and so we have lost that text and lost its great meaning and as I said what we have not received by the word we must receive in our experience so there's a road to Calvary ahead for the nation and in that suffering as they pass through and have no beauty that any should desire them if we don't meet them by the grace given us in covenant because they will be despicable they will be unclean they will be stinking they will not have had access to showers their clothes are running on their back their sores are mollifying and fly infested they're in pathetic condition they have no beauty that any should desire them how should we desire them except the grace of God by our covenant relationship with him enables us to be to

them what he himself is so the issue of covenant is the critical factor in the consummation of the age for the church toward Israel and that Israel itself might be saved through it and brought into that everlasting covenant so on the same day in verse 18 the Lord made a covenant a promise a pledge it began by speaking it ends by speaking the God who creates is the God who speaks his speaking is an event and it's on that event of his word and promise that we are to cast ourselves Abraham cast himself on that although his body was as good as dead looking upon himself he had no descendants he was near a hundred years old as was Sarah and God said look at the stars in the sky so great will your your progeny be and he believed God despite every appearance of the contrary God said he believed

so this is our classic father of the faith and the one with whom God makes the classic covenant that becomes the pattern of all subsequent covenant and in 17 we have another visitation of the Lord when Abraham is 99 years old the Lord appeared to him and said I am the almighty God walk and live habitually before me and be perfect blameless wholehearted complete that's that's an invitation to be a son of a covenant there's no way you're going to be that by human resolve God gives an ultimate like mount of beatitude requirement be thou perfect and walk thou before me only possible by someone with whom a

covenant has been made who can draw on the grace of God to be this one because how dare we speak of circumcision and having no confidence in the flesh when we speak of it out of the flesh

that would be a patent contradiction in terms so of necessity the subject itself must be presented in its own context and that's why the Lord has got me in my hands to the depth and significance of that which is not made with hands and we're still waiting for the fulfillment of that great mystery and the expression of that fruit to come

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