S1E14: The One-Sided Handshake

THE PROMISE: God Calls a Family (Gen. 11-50)

At the heart of God's redemption plan is covenant, a promise between two parties that is inviolate on pain of death. At the heart of Abraham's story is God's covenant to make him a great nation.

God makes a covenant with Abraham: Gen. 15 and 17
God binds himself. The sovereign takes the whole obligation on himself. Abraham can't do it, so God will.

What makes a great nation?
- A kingdom needs a people, a land, and a ruler
- Gen. 15 focuses on land; Gen. 17 turns to people and descendants. One covenant, expanded
- So far the emphasis is physical, with Abraham's moral character in the background

The suzerain-vassal treaty (Gen. 15)
- An ancient treaty between unequal parties, an overlord (suzerain) and a lesser king (vassal), with three parts
    - Preamble: the suzerain is named and his deeds for the vassal recalled. "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur to give you this land" (15:7)
    - Stipulations: what the vassal owes. Here there are none. Abraham only receives, and God obligates himself
    - Blessings and curses: captivity in another land (Egypt), then a return to possess the land. No curses

Cutting the covenant
- Treaties were sealed in public. Animals were cut in half, and the two parties walked between the pieces: may this happen to me if I break the covenant
- Abraham only watches. God alone passes through, as a smoking firepot and flaming torch
- It is one-sided: "Abraham, you can't do it. I have to."

Timing and the Amorites (Gen. 15:16)

- Israel returns “in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete”
- This is God’s sovereign timing, not arbitrary violence. Human sinfulness has been global since the flood and Babel, and God must deal with wickedness as well as bless the earth
- The long view: the heart problem is what must finally be redeemed, and this is the first step

Genesis 17: the covenant expands

- About 25 years later. For the first time we hear of Abraham’s conduct: “Walk before me and be blameless”
- A name change: Abram, Exalted Father, becomes Abraham, Father of Many. Many nations and kings will come from him
    - Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, is the ultimate fulfillment as the Eternal King
- Another cutting: circumcision. Now Abraham takes part and obligates himself, and every male in his line bears the mark (why circumcision? next episode)

God uses the language and customs of the day, then inverts them. The King of kings comes to Abraham as the vassal and takes the whole obligation on himself. The Holy One is faithful to do what he said.