

# GIVE & RECEIVE

---

## Understanding Why Covenants Count | Thicker Than Water (Pt 1)

Text: Matthew 1:1-23

### I

I hope that amidst all of the chilliness and challenges of this winter, there have been some real bursts of warmth and light for you. In fact, I hope that your involvement in this community of faith is one of those encouragements in your life. The unambiguously happiest event in OUR family's life this winter was certainly associated with you, this church. I'm speaking of the wedding on January 2 of our son, Cole, to the fabulous Heather DeBoer.

Heather and Cole have each been part of this church family since infancy. They've been loved and mentored and *endured* by so many of you as they've grown up through seasons that weren't always pretty! Their faith was formed in the Sunday School and youth ministries of this church. They volunteered at camps and mission trips together. Their knowledge of each other slowly got bigger and bigger, till eventually it began to change from friendship to love. Until the day came when they were ready to make a commitment to journey forward together as husband and wife.

Forgive me for going on about this, but there was so much about the experience that choked me up. Getting to sit next to Amy, holding hands and just being a husband and dad (instead of standing on the platform) was really wonderful. Watching Pete Stearns, whose wedding I conducted years ago, now conducting our child's wedding struck me as one of those beautiful chains of blessing that the church is all about. Seeing Heather and Cole's siblings and friends thronging around them, people of faith, pledging to be there for the couple not just on that day but for the rest of their lives, was simply amazing. I thought, if only all of us could live within a circle of love like that, no adversity could stop us from becoming our best.

But, other than how beautiful the mothers of the bride and groom looked, there are TWO particular highlights from that wedding that have lodged in my mind – and I bring them up because these TWO THEMES bear significantly on the subject I want to explore with you today and throughout this season up to Easter.

### II

One of them was the theme of FULFILLMENT. How many of you have ever planned a wedding, or a massive party, or a giant event for school or work? I bet that circle enfolds a lot of us. Well, then, you know what goes into that. You know the staggering array of details and decisions, trips and slips, people and places, and crises and changes that are necessary to pull that thing off. Is there any feeling so wonderful as

when it finally all comes together in a moment of fulfillment? You're the parents of the bride and the months of preparation during a pandemic are finally over and you are watching your daughter dance her first dance. But, as I discovered that day, my daughter-in-law's parents were experiencing a sense of fulfillment of a much larger kind.

During his toast at the wedding reception, John DeBoer spoke of how, many years ago, he and his wife, Amy, had bought a piece of furniture that would become their family's kitchen table. They would celebrate so many moments in their lives and that of their three daughters at that table. It would get shaken, spilled on and scuffed up. But that table would be one of the great constants in that family's life. Yet, John said, there was always something else special about that table. He and Amy had purchased a larger table than they thought they'd need right away in the expectation that, someday, there would be OTHERS joining them there.

Little Heather certainly wasn't conscious of any real vacancy next to her, but John and Amy saw that space and prayed for the one who would fill it. Through so many seasons and for so many years, that space sat waiting... waiting for the time to be right... waiting for all the circumstances to line up... waiting for the moment when, nearly a quarter century later, a Great Love would arrive and sit down in that place, fulfilling its promise. "Cole," John said, lifting a glass, "welcome to your place at the family table." [VIDEO PLAYS HERE]

Speaking of families... the Bible says: **This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about (Mat 1:18a)**. These, too, are amazing words... telling us something about an even larger family's experience of FULFILLMENT. These words appear in the middle of the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament. The gospel-writer, Matthew, is speaking to Jewish people here. He's basically raising a glass that the promise and prayer for a Messiah has now been fulfilled. At long last, the empty seat at the table has been taken and a new era for the Jewish family is dawning.

Fair enough, you may think, the Messiah has come. I think I've heard that often enough in church that I can go back to checking my email. I get it. Many of us HAVE heard THAT story often enough that we sort of have a "So what?" attitude toward it. But that's going to change in these next several weeks. If you stay with us, by Easter, you're going to understand in a fresh and exciting way, why the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah is not just good news like – "Your child has found the love their life" – but vastly more wonderful than that.

To get at this truth, however, it helps to understand that this verse in the Bible is what scholar Christopher Wright, calls a swinging door. In other words, it's import swings forward and backward in time. When you swing the verse forward, it opens upon a room you know well. The words right after, **This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about**, are: **His mother Mary was pledged to be married to**

**Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit (Mat 1:18b)... All this took place to FULFILL what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). (Mat 1:22-23).** You're familiar with this story, aren't you?

But when you swing the door the other way and look back to the text that comes before this, you and I enter a room that is not quite as familiar. I strongly encourage you to open up a Bible on your lap or phone and look at the first seventeen verses of the entire New Testament. It begins: **This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mat 1:1).** And then Matthew marches us through lists of names that sound like professional football players, spanning 52 generations or roughly 2,000 years. It's a tongue-twister list I won't attempt till I've had another cup of coffee, but I will give you the takeaway.

Do you want to know the takeaway? Here it is: You can't get Jesus till you get what he came to fulfill. I mean, you can sort of get Jesus without knowing much about the Old Testament. You can understand that he was a great teacher and a very loving person and he died on a cross. You can get that without knowing much about Abraham and David and all the rest of the women and men mentioned all the way back to Genesis. But that would be like saying you know the Bride or Groom at a wedding while knowing very little about their family, or the hopes and promises they are fulfilling, or what the legacy before them means to the Bride or Groom.

So, here's our invitation over this Lenten and Easter season. Join us every week for these next seven weeks and we will help you get to know Jesus at a deeper level, by getting to know the great family bloodline that flows up to Jesus and through Jesus toward you, THICKER THAN WATER.

As we move in that direction, there are two things I encourage you to especially look for in our study. The first of them I've already mentioned – the idea of FULFILLMENT. In the biblical story – as in your life and mine – there are some empty chairs or places of promise that are waiting for fulfillment. The story of the Old Testament is the tale of human yearnings and the bad and good things they do to fill those gaps. We'll see a lot of ourselves and our society there. We'll encounter people who give up hope that their needs will be met or their world can be fixed and so settle for solutions that are actually deeper problems.

But, as we'll see, God never gives up on them. He keeps working out his good purposes in spite of his peoples' doubts and failures. He keeps holding out new possibilities and moving new people into strategic positions. Our Heavenly Father watches his world, waiting for the time to be right, for the circumstances to line up, for the ultimate Fulfiller to come and take his seat, and for us to recognize Him.

### III

The second theme I encourage to think about as we go forward in this series is the idea of COVENANT. That word came alive freshly for me, again, during the marriage ceremony of Heather and Cole last month. I heard them speaking the same words that Amy and I said to each other some thirty-two years ago: *"I... do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful husband or wife."*

As we read the Bible, we run again and again into relational arrangements that go by this word, "Covenant." In ancient times, a covenant was similar to what we today would call a contract or a treaty. A covenant established (1) the basis for a relationship – i.e. why we are pursuing this arrangement at all. It articulated (2) the conditions and promises that would define it – i.e. what each party would give or receive. And, (3) a covenant often spelled out the consequences if those conditions were not met. For example – and as Tara Beth helped us explore over the past two weeks -- the basis of the covenant of Christian marriage is love and a desire for mutual flourishing. The conditions and promises are that we'll submit to and serve one another out of reverence for Christ and experience the blessing of having a true helpmate in life. And the consequences if that covenant is broken is a lot of pain and loss.

Why is it important to really understand the concept of a COVENANT? Well, for three practical reasons that I invite you to think about with me: First, covenants form the skeletal structure for the whole biblical story. Once you understand the specific covenants God made with his people, you will much better understand the meaning of the Bible itself.

Secondly, covenants deeply matter to God. In fact, it's fair to say that one of the most defining aspects to God's character is that He is a covenant maker, keeper, and fulfiller. He speaks and acts in the Bible as if living faithfully within covenantal circles is a major key to a thriving life. If that's true, then who of us would not want to know more about covenants?

The final reason to become more knowledgeable about covenants is because on the night before He went to the cross, Jesus said that He came to establish a NEW covenant. Somebody once said that trying to understand that New Covenant by just studying the gospels is sort of like reading just the FINAL installment in the Harry Potter series. It's not a bad thing. You will enjoy a great story to be sure. But you'll miss the layers and layers of meaning there and the extraordinary way in which this final installment is the fulfillment of all the storylines before it. In this series, we will look at seven major covenants God established with people. We'll see how they display truths so immensely relevant for our lives today. And we'll see how all of these patterns and promises prepared the way for something even more awesome – the fulfillment of God's plan in the person and work of Jesus – the one Perfect Love who came and took his place at the table next to you and me.

Please pray with me...

*Lord, your servant Paul taught that the Church is the Bride of Christ. Give us a love for you, more like the utter devotion I saw reflected in the eyes of Heather for Cole. Help us to believe and experience that you have a love for us even greater than the love with which that Groom gazed into the eyes of his Bride. Above all, show us this Lenten season how to live more fully into a covenant with you and why that so matters for us and the people who watch the way we live. For it is in the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*