

Does Unconditional Really Mean Unconditional?

by Bob Nyberg

Genesis 15 presents a fascinating account of God making an unconditional covenant with Abram (who would later be called Abraham). Abram is concerned because he has no heirs. In verse 5 God tells Abram, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be." To ratify that promise God uses a Chaldean sacrificial ritual. When a contract was made between two people, according to Chaldean tradition, the two parties would pass between animals that had been prepared for sacrifice. But in this account, it was God Himself who passed between the sacrificial animals thus signifying that this covenant was unconditional. There were no strings attached. There were no "if then" clauses in the contract. There was no fine print that would make the contract null and void.

Part of that unconditional covenant included a specific clause regarding land. In verse 18 we read:

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."

This same unconditional covenant was reiterated to Abraham's sons, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore we can conclude that the promise is for Israel. But Israel has never occupied all of that land which was promised to Abraham and his descendants. So what are we to make of that promise?

Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians handle this dilemma differently.

Dispensationalists contend that since God cannot lie and this covenant is unconditional then Israel will one day inherit all of this land when Jesus will establish His Messianic Kingdom and reign on earth for a thousand years.

On the other hand, Covenant Theologians tell us that this covenant with Abraham must have been conditional. In spite of the fact that there are no "if then" clauses in the contract, God revoked His promises which were made to Abraham because Israel as a nation failed to obey Him. I guess Abraham should have read the fine print.

In Genesis chapter 28 we see this unconditional covenant being repeated to Abraham's grandson Jacob. As Jacob is about to leave home his father Isaac blesses him saying, "May God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you that you may be an assembly of peoples; And give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants with you, that you may inherit the land in which you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham."

For a young man leaving home, that must have been a tremendous encouragement. Even so, Jacob must have had his doubts about these wonderful promises as he was traveling to a strange land.

Later in chapter 28 we see Jacob lying down to sleep. No doubt he was tired from a hard day's journey. As he closes his eyes to rest, God gives him a magnificent dream. The Genesis account states:

Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And

behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28:12-17)

Not only does Jacob have the blessing of his father Isaac, God Himself confirms the unconditional Abrahamic covenant with him.

But does unconditional really mean unconditional? Maybe there is some hidden escape clause that God has in this contract. Maybe there really is an "if then" clause written between the lines that we have somehow missed in the sacred text. Maybe unconditional Chaldean contracts actually have strings attached.

The Holy Spirit inspired the text of scripture. He laid out God's Word chapter by chapter and verse by verse with intentionality. It's no accident that the events found in chapter 27 set the stage for chapter 28.

Immediately preceding the account of God's vision to Jacob, we find another fascinating narrative. Genesis 27 paints a portrait of Jacob's deceitful dealings with his father Isaac and brother Esau. Jacob and his mother Rebekah hatch a plot in order to steal the blessings of the first born from Esau. Isaac, in his old age, is just about blind. In order to deceive his father, Jacob dresses up like his older brother Esau. Rebekah prepares one of Isaac's favorite meals, which is a specialty of Esau. Jacob presents this meal to his father Isaac. In doing so he successfully dupes his father. Isaac bestows the blessing of the first born on Jacob, believing him to be Esau. Shortly after that, Esau returns home and Jacob's reprehensible actions are uncovered. Certainly now things would be put right. Because of Jacob's deceit, the blessings of the first born would be rendered null and void. At least you would think so. But not according to Chaldean custom.

Genesis 27:34 tells us that Esau "cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me—me also, O my father!'"

But Isaac had absolutely no recourse. He replied, "Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing."

The blessings that Isaac pronounced upon Jacob were unconditional. There were no strings attached. There were no "if then" clauses. There was no fine print. Though Jacob's crime was truly reprehensible there was no court in the Chaldean land that would over turn the unconditional pronounced blessings.

This is the narrative that the Holy Spirit uses to set the stage for chapter 28. God graciously appears to that scoundrel Jacob and reiterates the unconditional covenant which He made with Abraham. There were no strings attached ... no "if then" clauses ... no fine print!

Does unconditional really mean unconditional? Absolutely! Israel will indeed inherit all the territory that God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Jesus the Messiah sits on the throne of David in Jerusalem, then Israel will once again regain that favored nation status that she lost when she refused the offer of the Kingdom by the Son of God some 2000 years ago.

Just as the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are unconditional, so too are the promises regarding the security of the believer which are found in the New Testament. If the unconditional Abrahamic covenant had hidden conditional clauses that would render the contract null and void, then what guarantee do we have regarding our own salvation? According to Covenant Theology the church has replaced Israel because the Abrahamic covenant had hidden strings attached. According to them, Israel forfeited these contractual promises because of their disobedience. They lost their national “eternal security” so to speak. Yet these same Covenant Theologians insist upon their doctrine of “perseverance of the saints.” Well excuse me, but you can’t have it both ways. Either an unconditional covenant is always unconditional or it’s not. If Israel was never on secure ground because of hidden conditional clauses in the Abrahamic covenant, then what right does anyone have to insist that there are no strings attached to the promises of salvation found in the New Testament? To say that Israel lost her national salvation permanently, and insist that the believer can never lose their eternal salvation is an absolutely untenable position. The promises made to Abraham and his descendants are just as sure as God’s promises to us regarding our salvation.

For **all** the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us (2 Cor. 1:20).

All (not just some) of the promises of God are backed by His magnificent immutable character. The litigators in heaven did not find some obscure loophole that would negate the Abrahamic covenant. Neither will they find some cryptic conditional clause that will invalidate the promises of salvation made to the believer. You can take that to the bank!