

10.04.2021 COVENANT PRIMER

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.” Exodus 19:5

‘Primer’ – Definition: an introductory textbook/manual.

Covenant Basics

A covenant is an agreement or contract between 2 or more persons. It is a legally binding obligation. The oath associated with the covenant makes it legally binding. In the Biblical context, covenants between God and man are more than a legal contract – there is a personal relationship involved.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for covenant is *‘berith’*. While it is a generic term for any covenant, in the context of redemption, it is an agreement between man and God.

In the New Testament the word ‘testament’ is usually used. There are 2 words used for ‘testament’:
Syntithēmi – an agreement, to covenant, a contract; and *Diathēkē* - a will.

Many accept that the word ‘gospel’ in the New Testament is a description of the Everlasting Covenant.

In spiritual terms, there are 2 types of covenants described in the Bible – conditional and unconditional. It is important to distinguish between these two types of covenants in order to have a clear picture of what the Bible teaches.

A conditional (bilateral) covenant is an agreement between two or more parties that requires certain terms to be met. If the terms are met, there will be one kind of result (favourable). If the terms are not met, there will be a different result (unfavourable).

Often associated with the phrase...‘*You shall*’ or ‘*You shall not*’ to describe the terms to be met.

“You shall have no other gods before Me...You shall not make for yourself a carved image...” Exodus 20:3, 4

The Old Covenant made at Sinai is an example of a bilateral or conditional covenant. Both parties accept terms to be met and both parties confirm the covenant with an oath.

So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has said we will do”...Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”Exodus 24:3, 7-8

Obedience in a bilateral (conditional) covenant requires a knowledge of God, a belief in His word/command and obedience to that command manifested by doing what the Lord commands.

An unconditional (unilateral) covenant is an agreement between two or more parties **that involves no conditions of any kind placed on one party for fulfilment of the agreement**. One party promises to provide, with no conditions given to the other party.

Often associated with the phrase ‘*I will...*’ to describe the promises that one party makes.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Jeremiah 31:33

The great example of such a covenant is the Everlasting Covenant (also called the New Covenant). God promised redemption and restoration of mankind to His image and affirmed the covenant promises with an oath.

When God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself...thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability (unchanging purpose) of His counsel, confirmed (guaranteed) it by an oath. Hebrews 6:13, 17

Some commentators prefer the term 'unilateral covenant' instead of 'unconditional covenant' as the second party to whom the promises have been made also have conditions to meet in an unconditional covenant. These conditions are different from the conditions of a conditional covenant. The condition is FAITH. The second party is required to:

1. BELIEVE in the promises of God.
2. ACCEPT the promises of God by faith.
3. SURRENDER DAILY to the will of God so that His promises can be fulfilled in the believer's life.

The New Testament calls this 'OBEDIENCE TO THE FAITH' (Romans 1:5; 16:26) and 'OBEYING THE GOSPEL' (Romans 10:18).

Before we look at covenants for this week's study, we shall first look at the covenants made with Adam as they form the basis of the covenants thereafter.

The Covenants with Adam: Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace.

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Genesis 2:15-17

The covenant with Adam made in Eden (the Pre-Fall covenant), consists of blessings and a warning to Adam. He and Eve are created in God's image, and given dominion over the animals. They are given the gift of relationship with one another and the ability to bear children and expand the race over the whole Earth. They are vegetarian, so no slaughter of animals is necessary. Eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden. God makes it clear that *"in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). Adam broke this covenant when he took the fruit that Eve gave him, and ate it, defying God's command and bringing the penalty of death on the whole race (Romans 5:12-14).

The Post-Fall Covenant with Adam deals with the consequences of his sin, but most importantly, offers the redemption and deliverance that will be offered in Christ Jesus. As we saw last week, the Godhead had already made provision for man's rebellion.

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." Genesis 3:15

'God originally made a covenant with Adam. He put him into the Garden and told him that if he did certain things he would have a certain reward. That is called a covenant of works, because Adam's inheritance of this promise was entirely dependent upon his works, upon what he did. But Adam broke the covenant; he failed, and landed himself and his posterity in a terrible plight. So, from there on God has made a new covenant, which is called the covenant of grace.

Clearly, God could not make another covenant of works with man. If man, in an ideal position and while perfect, could not keep the covenant of works, what would be the object of making another covenant of works with fallen man? So the Bible tells us that God did not do this but that He made the covenant of grace. And yet in this covenant, God has introduced a condition. He has made His promises. He has told us what He is making possible for us. But He does make a demand upon us. He tells us that we are only going to receive and enjoy these promises if we have faith, and we have to accept this condition voluntarily before we will enjoy the blessings. But furthermore, God has also told us in the covenant that He Himself is going to do something which makes it possible for us to derive these benefits, and that is why it is called the covenant of grace.' *Martyn Lloyd Jones: Great Doctrines of the Bible.*

'It was possible for Adam, before the fall, to form a righteous character by obedience to God's law. But he failed to do this, and because of his sin our natures are fallen and we cannot make ourselves righteous. Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness.'
Steps to Christ p. 62

Covenant with Noah

And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopherwood..." Genesis 6:13, 14

But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. Genesis 6:18

Noah...a preacher of righteousness. 2 Peter 2:5

This is a conditional covenant. God had a relationship with Noah and commanded him to do certain things. Noah obeyed.

God made another covenant with Noah after the Flood.

Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer and day and night shall not cease." Genesis 8:21, 22

And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." Genesis 9:12-16

This covenant is an unconditional covenant of grace. God promises unconditionally, never to destroy living creatures by flood waters and gives the rainbow as His covenant sign. **He will keep His promises despite the fact that 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'. God Himself is the only One who can provide the solution to our sin problem.**

The Abram Covenant

Our study makes it clear that before God entered into a legal covenant with Abram, He met Abram and offered him a relationship with Him that would result in great blessing not only to Abram and his family but also all the families of the earth.

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3

'Get out from your country...' – the blessings of God cannot be enjoyed while we are still in the world. They can only be enjoyed in the kingdom of God, when we live in a saving relationship with Him. Abram recognised this... 'So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him' Genesis 12:4

God gave him abundant promises... 'I will...I will'

While some of these promises would be fulfilled in Abram's lifetime, the ultimate fulfilment would be found in Abraham's greater Son, Christ Jesus.

Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. Galatians 3:16

What was Abram's response to the promises of God?

And he (Abram) believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. Genesis 15:6

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. Hebrews 11:8

This is the obedience of faith.

Do we believe the promises of God? Then we are the spiritual children of Abraham.

Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. Galatians 3:6-9

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:29

Covenant with Moses

And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD (Jehovah). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD (Jehovah) I was not known to them. I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers... I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the Lord; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the Lord.'" Exodus 6:2-8

The similarities between this covenant and the covenant of Abram are obvious. God will be their God, He will keep the covenant promises He made to Abram and his children (seed). He will be their God and they will be His people. He will redeem them from the bondage of the world (Egypt) and bring them to the land He gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

All these blessings would result from the obedience of faith i.e. an obedience arising out a relationship with Him '*you are My people, I am your God*'; when they took God at His word, trusted in Him and obeyed. This is the obedience of faith.

This covenant and the post-flood covenant with Noah remind us that the work of redemption begins with God. We are totally helpless in regard to escaping the bondage of sin. It is as we see the goodness of God in redeeming the ungodly (Romans 4:5) that we are led to repentance (Romans 2:4) - a life-changing attitude towards God. He becomes 'our God'.

"Note the order here: the Lord first *saves* Israel, then gives them His law to *keep*. The same order is true under the gospel. Christ first saves us from sin (see John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4), then lives out His law within us (Galatians 2:20; Romans 4:25; 8:1-3; 1 Peter 2:24)." — The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 1, p. 602.

'But there was a still greater truth to be impressed upon their minds. Living in the midst of idolatry and corruption, they had no true conception of the holiness of God, of the exceeding sinfulness of their own hearts, their utter inability, in themselves, to render obedience to God's law, and their need of a Saviour. All this they must be taught...

The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God's law; and they readily entered into covenant with God. Feeling that they were able to establish their own righteousness, they declared, "All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient." Exodus 24:7.' *Patriarchs and Prophets* p 371-372

The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord.

This is a New covenant, because the Old covenant at Sinai was faulty. The fault lay with God's people, not with God.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Hebrews 8:7

'But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people'. 31:33

The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth "the fruits of the Spirit." Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked. *Patriarchs and Prophets p 372*

'No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them', says the LORD. 31:34

God guarantees that to all who wish to know Him, He will personally reveal Himself to them.

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. John 17:3

'For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.'

This is the blessing that makes the other two blessings of the Covenant possible – the blessing of forgiveness and the blotting out sin, provided by the mighty death of Christ.

Conclusion:

All these covenants foreshadow Christ. In the New Testament, Christ is 'the Seed that bruises the serpent's heel' and 'the Preacher of Righteousness'. He is 'the Seed of Abraham' who by His life and death has removed the curse of sin and provided the righteousness of God to mankind. He is the truly Obedient One, who perfectly kept and fulfilled the law of God. He is the royal Son of David who inaugurated God's kingdom in His life, death, and resurrection, and now is exalted to God's right hand. Jesus perfectly succeeded at every point human beings failed. This makes Him the Guarantor and Mediator of the New (Everlasting) Covenant...*He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. Hebrews 9:15*