

Introducing.....

The Covenant

The significance of the Covenant Relationship in the Bible

A Pilgrim's Guide to the Bible

No. 6

Covenant: 'a written agreement or promise.... Between two or more parties, especially for the performance of some action.' (Webster's Dictionary).

An understanding of the word 'covenant' takes us to the heart of what the Bible is all about, and indeed, to the heart of faith itself.

As Christians, we are people of a covenant. Membership of God's family should have a bearing on every aspect of our lives. The Bible consists of two covenants, old and new, the new superseding the old with the coming of Jesus into the world. The word 'testament' is interchangeable with 'covenant'.

We are familiar with contracts, which set out the precise terms and responsibilities of both parties in a formal agreement. They may take various forms: e.g. contracts of employment; marriage vows, peace treaties, the Magna Carta. These all contain clearly outlined responsibilities for all the parties involved.

In early biblical times, a covenant was the normal form of government in Near Eastern societies. A king would make a covenant with his tribe. He would offer protection and security to his people, whilst his subjects, in return would covenant their loyalty and if

necessary, a willingness to take up arms and defend their tribe. So a covenant was for the mutual benefit of both parties.

The biblical covenant is similar. The people of Israel initially accepted God as their King, and lived in obedience to the terms of the covenant. God pledged his protection, care and help to his chosen people, whilst the people, in turn, pledged to be faithful to God, by obeying His commandments. However, the biblical concept of covenant pre-dates even the nation of Israel. It passes through a number of stages.

The Covenant with Noah

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis 9: 12 - 13)

The covenant with Noah, after the flood, demonstrates God's concern for all mankind. God put a rainbow in the sky to assert that never again will He wipe the world out with a flood. Although humanity fully deserved retribution for failing to live by God's standards, God's love was so strong that He covenanted never again to destroy the earth; Noah, in return, covenanted to serve and worship God and to populate the world. But in the following chapters, human disobedience increased, thus breaking the human side of the covenant, which led to the need for a new beginning. So the story moves on to the Lord's choice of Abraham as the chosen father of the nation of Israel.

The Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15 and 17)

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. (Genesis 17:7)

The covenant with Abraham marks the beginning of God's plan to redeem the world through the choice of a particular community that would be His chosen instrument of salvation. Abraham is the father of all who have faith in God. This covenant is ratified with Isaac and Jacob, but this community had to discover the saving power of God for itself in a unique way. The experience of the exodus provided this, and introduces us to Moses, to whom the covenant is renewed, along with the conditions associated with it.

The Covenant with Moses

'If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Exodus 19: 5-6)

The terms of the Covenant signify that God is in control. Israel must accept its task in humility and obedience. The people had moved from slavery to freedom. God had acted on their behalf. Everything else that follows is based on that fact. The foundational events of this covenant are found in the Book of Exodus – beginning with the story of the Passover, when God led His chosen people out of Egypt, through to the giving of the Law.

Although this covenant is addressed to Israel, God still has a universal interest. He is concerned for the whole world. The covenant God made with Abraham was for the blessing of all nations, but Israel has a special purpose within His plans. They are to be: *'a priestly kingdom'* and *'a holy nation'*. A priest was some-one who stood between the people and God. He represented the people before God by bringing their sacrifices to the altar. Through the priest, the people could come to God. So God is saying to the Hebrews: *'You have a responsibility to represent the world to Me.'* Holiness means 'set apart', or simply, 'being different', suggesting that Israel should be different: a people who represented God to the nations of the world by their life and example, and by teaching the Law of God, not just in words, but by practical demonstration of God's character. Holiness includes every aspect of life: social, family, economic, political, judicial, racial. God's people are called to be different from the rest of the world.

We see the terms of the covenant expressed in the Law, most notably, the Ten Commandments, which underpin the relationship between God and his people throughout the Old Testament:

1. *You shall not worship any other god but Yahweh.*
2. *You shall not make a graven image.*
3. *You shall not take the name of Yahweh in vain.*
4. *You shall not break the Sabbath.*
5. *You shall not dishonour your parents.*
6. *You shall not murder.*
7. *You shall not commit adultery*
8. *You shall not steal.*
9. *You shall not commit perjury.*
10. *You shall not covet.*

But that covenant was not enough, because the nation could never keep it. Constantly, the people had to be reminded of its terms, and brought to confession. Nehemiah chapter 9 provides a good example of this process. Following the nation's return from exile in Babylon the nation was called to confession, followed by re-affirmation of the covenant.

This covenant could never be 100% satisfactory, because none of us, whether Jew or Gentile, are able to keep it in its entirety. But through the process of establishing the covenant, God, in His mercy, was preparing the way for the introduction of a new covenant - a covenant in which love would reign supreme.

A New Covenant Promised

This new covenant is anticipated as we turn to the prophets, who foresee how God's plans will be worked out. Isaiah looks forward to the coming of a Servant King, who will carry the sins of the world on his shoulders. Ezekiel looks forward to the day when God will give his people a new heart and breathe new life into the dry bones of a dead people. Jeremiah encapsulates this hope succinctly when he writes:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

What is this new covenant? Undoubtedly, it points towards God's ultimate plan for the redemption of the world.

The New Covenant

With the birth of Jesus Christ, the way is opened for a new covenant between God and the people of earth; it remains God's initiative; it still contains the call to holiness, but the great High Priest of this covenant is now Jesus himself. God has intervened directly into world affairs, and offers us a new way of covenanting with Him.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that all those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

This covenant is sealed by the work of Christ upon the cross, and we remember it every time we share in a service of Holy Communion.

'While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.' (Mark 14: 22 - 24)

With the coming of Jesus, we are saved by the grace of God, freely bestowed upon us through faith in Christ. His death and resurrection offer the framework for the covenant. The challenge that we face is to live out our side of the covenant, namely:

'You shall love the Lord our God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind, all of your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22: 37 - 40)

Receiving the Covenant

Being a covenant people confers obligations upon us as well as blessings. So how do we live as those committed to being God's people? The covenant demands belief in God and the manner in which He presents Himself to us; a humble desire to live as part of God's community; a willingness to respond to Him in faith and obedience.

The obvious starting point is to believe in the terms of the covenant. This involves:

- Believing that God makes us in His image (Genesis 1:26) and that we can have a living relationship with Him.
- Accepting that as part of the human race, our lives are damaged by sin, and that left to ourselves, we cannot repair that damage.
- Acknowledging that Jesus Christ is God in human form, that he died on the cross, and rose from the dead in full and complete payment for our sin.
- Responding by inviting Jesus to be Lord of our hearts and lives.

Below is a suggested prayer to use if you wish to make your own, personal response to God:

Lord Jesus, thank you that you love me, and that you know what is best for my life. I am sorry for the times that I have gone my own way, and failed to consider you. Thank you for dying for my sins. Forgive me, and help me to be different from now on. Take control of my life, and fill me with your Spirit, so that I can please you in all that I do. Amen.

St. John writes in his Gospel:

'To all who received him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God.' (John 1:12)

The New Testament (New Covenant) picks up, and reinterprets some of the language from the Old Covenant to describe how we, as followers of Jesus, are called into the community of God.

'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.' (1 Peter 2:5,9)

Much Old Covenant imagery is used to provide background understanding of the New Covenant. For the first, Jewish Christians, who wrote the New Testament, the connections would have been obvious. The formation of a Gentile Church has inevitably meant that we have to work at understanding the Jewish roots of the Gospel in order to appreciate more fully what God has done for us. Hence we have the language of the Exodus and Passover to describe our journey from sin to salvation; Jesus is the Lamb of God; Paul describes Jesus as 'Christ our Passover' (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Do we still need the Old Covenant?

As Christians, we are people of the New Covenant. Our relationship with God, our life within His family and our eternal hope, are all based upon faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So why then, should we continue to read the Old Testament?

Although the Old Testament is not our covenant, it still contains the *word* of the Lord, if not always the *command* of the Lord. Many of the terms of the Old Covenant have not been renewed, in fact they have been superseded by the New Covenant. But we still read them because they offer us background knowledge that brings us to a deeper understanding of how (and why) God is calling us to faith in Him. So whilst many of the commandments about worship, the sacrificial system, dietary regulations etc. no longer

apply to us, much of the moral teaching in the Old Covenant has been applied, and reinterpreted in the New.

Our Lord's commands to love God and to love our neighbour are clearly based upon his re-statement of Old Covenant law. Whilst the Ten Commandments offer us a moral basis upon which to build our Christian lives, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5 - 7) offers us a challenging re-statement of the Old Covenant law for a New Covenant people.

Looking further back than Moses, Abraham is still referred to in the New Covenant as the 'father of all who have faith in God', so our story of faith draws upon Abraham's story, and the covenant with Noah reminds us that ultimately, God is Lord of all the earth.

Jesus is Lord of all the earth!

So we need to understand the terms of the Old Covenant in order to be able to fully appreciate the New Covenant.