

# **Understanding Covenant**

## Explore Your Faith Teaching Series - Explo-14 ©

With Pastor Joseph Rodrigues

### **OUTLINE**

#### **Introduction**

We refer to the Old Testament and the New Testament as dealing with the Mosaic and Christian dispensations respectively. But the word 'Covenant' is far more descriptive and endearing when we seek to describe God's reaching out to man.

God is a Covenanting person. He only ever enters into relationship through covenant. And so, we are a covenanted people.

This study explores biblical covenants, examines the concept of covenant and the process of covenant entering.

Finally, it examines the spiritual significance of covenant for the Christian.

Studying covenant principles is a great way to understand God's love, his grace, and faithfulness. A thrilling study!

In this study, we will examine several biblical concepts that are essential to our understanding of being God's people. The topics we consider in this segment play an important part in determining our *attitudes* (the way we view our spirituality) and our *behaviour* (the way we act out our spirituality).

As we study the concept of 'COVENANT', we will understand why it plays an important role in determining our attitudes (the way we view our spirituality) and our *behaviour* (the way we act out our spirituality) as God's people.

#### **The terminology**

The two key words in the bible for covenant or alliance are 'b'rit' (Heb.) and 'diatheke' (Gk.)

The Hebrew word refers usually to the act or rite of making the covenant. It also can mean the standing contract between two partners.

The Greek word is the translation (Septuagint) of this Hebrew word. It is later carried over into the New Testament where its primary meaning is 'testament'.

In the Hebrew, other words were also used in a covenantal context: - *ahab* = to love; *hesed* = covenant love or solidarity; *toba* = goodness or friendship; *shalom* = covenantal peace or covenantal prosperity; and *yada* = to serve faithfully in accordance with the covenant.

The technical term in connection with covenant-making is *karat b'rit*; literally, 'to cut a covenant', and points to the ancient rite of cutting an animal with the forming of a treaty or covenant. Many other Hebrew verbs are used in place of 'to cut', such as 'to establish', 'to give', 'to declare', 'to swear', 'to confirm', 'to command' and 'to make'.

Various verbs were used to denote the people's participation in a covenant. Essentially these verbs differentiated between 'entering into', 'coming into', and 'standing in' a covenantal relationship. Similarly, two different Hebrew verbs (*nasar* and *samar*) were used to denote *the keeping of covenant* and a whole cluster of different verbs were used for *the breaking of covenant* (for example, 'to forget', 'to transgress', 'to despise', 'to break', 'to be false to', 'to profane' and 'to corrupt'. These differences are often subtle. But they are nevertheless important in that they help us to understand *in what manner* the covenant is broken

#### **Covenant as a 'Treaty'**

The making of Covenants or alliances (or treaties) was common in the ancient Near East between nations and groups of people. There were two main types of covenantal relationships

(1) A treaty of equals (a parity treaty), where the two parties are called brothers. This sort of treaty was restricted mainly to the acknowledgment of borders and to the return of runaway slaves.

(2) A vassal treaty which was contracted by a great king (the conqueror) and a minor king. In this sort of treaty, there were usually stipulations made such as (for example) the paying of taxes and the prohibition of any form of hostility towards other vassals, immediate assistance to the great king when needed, and the prohibition of slandering of the great king or of the hiding of refugees. It was usually 'witnessed' by a list

of gods, in which the great king's gods were prominently placed. Even natural phenomena would be called upon as 'witnesses'; heaven and earth, mountains, sea, rivers, etc.

Finally, curses and blessings usually concluded the vassal treaty. Certain blessings would accrue when the treaty is kept and certain curses would come into effect when the terms were broken.

The idea of a covenant relationship between a god and his king or people is also well attested through the history of the ancient Near East. The idea of such a covenant was therefore not alien to the Israelites when God entered into covenantal relationship with them as a *people*.

Both the types of treaties referred to above occur in the Old Testament.

The parity treaty – for example, between the Israelites and the Phoenicians, started between David and Hiram (1 Kings 5: 1) and renewed on a more elaborate scale by Solomon.

The vassal treaty – for example, between the Israelites and the Gibeonites (Jos. 9-10). (The vassal character is evident from the Gibeonites' desire to become their slaves).

### **The Biblical concept of covenant**

Whilst many aspects of the 'treaty' also find their place in Biblical Covenants, Covenant in the biblical context has these distinguishing characteristics:

- 1) In the biblical covenant, *the promise* plays a *predominant role*.
- 2) In every covenant between God and man, God has always been **the initiator**; covenant has always proceeded **from him to us**, never the other way round. For this reason, we need to get a proper understanding of what 'covenant' really means in God's eyes.

The covenant expresses a relationship which God sovereignly initiates, out of his own choice and decision. He defines the terms on which he is prepared to enter into that relationship with man. It is important to emphasize that the initiative is wholly with God, and the terms are set exclusively by God. Man's part is simply to respond to offer of a covenant and to accept the relationships which that covenant brings with it. Man does not set the terms, nor does he ever initiate the relationship.

***Important: When we refer to the 'Old Testament' and to the 'New Testament', we are really referring to two 'covenants'. In English, we do not normally think of 'covenant' and 'testament' as being the same. We limit the word 'testament' to a legal document, which (as Scripture points out) comes into force after the death of the one who made the testament. On the other hand, we do not usually think of covenant as being necessarily associated with the death of the parties to the covenant. In scripture, this distinction between testament and covenant is not valid. The two are the same even though the terms are used interchangeably.***

The central theme of Israelite thought was covenantal relationship. ***The covenant with its stipulations opened up the possibility of transgression and sin, with the consequence of judgment and punishment. This is one of the main themes of the Old Testament.*** However, there was also the important feature of the covenantal *promise* and the *expectation*. The Davidic covenant with the promise of an eternal throne gave rise to the expectation of the Messiah, Son of David and formed the most important link between OT and NT. With the new covenant of the NT a fresh expectation is given of the *Parousia* of the Messiah wherein is fulfilled the expectation of the earlier promises.

### **Biblical covenants**

#### ***The Noahic Covenants***

Two covenants (Gen. 6: 18 & Gen. 9:8-17)

Certain obligations on Noah, certain promises by the Lord

***The Patriarchal Covenant*** (Gen. 15 & Gen. 17). This covenant is predominantly promissory in nature. It is closely related to the Davidic covenant for this reason.

Two aspects:

1. the *multiplication* of Abraham's offspring (largely fulfilled: See Exodus 1:17-22)
2. The *inheritance* of the Promised Land (fulfilled in the conquering of the Promised Land in Joshua).

The fact that this covenant remained in force *even with the breaking of the Sinai covenant* (see Exodus 32 and 33:1) shows us how faithful God is to keep his promises.

### ***The Sinai Covenant***

Formed with ***Moses as mediator*** at Sinai, after their deliverance from Egyptian bondage  
Exodus 19 the theophany of the Lord is described  
Exodus 20 the policy of the Lord for his people is sketched (the Decalogue)  
Exodus 21-23 gives the stipulations  
Exodus 24 describes the actual covenant-forming rite. (Note the sacrifice, the blood, and the altar)  
This covenant rite involved the reading of the law, a response by the people, a sacrifice, sealing by oath and finally a covenant meal.

### ***The Davidic Covenant***

Mainly promissory; thus closely related to the Abrahamic covenant  
Not a new covenant but really *an extension* of the Sinai Covenant, becoming necessary because of the development of a new historical situation (the institution of the Israelite King).  
In a sense, this covenant superseded the Abrahamic covenant with these essentials:  
The promise to David of an eternal reign by his descendants  
God will be a father for David's son and the king will be a son for God (see 2 Sa.7)  
For these reasons, this covenant has profound influence on later expectations in the OT (see Ps. 2 and Ps.110) and even in the NT.

### ***Covenant in the NT***

This covenant was formed with ***Christ as mediator***.  
In the NT the word 'covenant' (Gk. =diatheke) is used in close connection with the Lord's Supper (Mk.14: 22-25; 1 Cor. 11:23-25)  
With the institution of the Holy Communion, Jesus refers to his body as the bread and his blood as the wine. This is an obvious reference to Jesus as the paschal lamb which must be slaughtered with Passover and be eaten by his disciples. (In actual fact, the killing of Jesus as the paschal lamb will take place at Golgotha on the following day)  
The paschal lamb became the covenant animal and the Holy Communion the covenant meal (refer to the initial "Passover" and the later requirement to commemorate it as a lasting memorial)  
Note the prominent role of blood in the covenant forming at Sinai, and Christ's reference to the 'new testament in his blood'.  
Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the most important part of the forming of the 'new covenant'.

### ***Significance of the New Covenant***

The old sinaitic covenant is removed by Christ (think about what this means!)  
Christ becomes the new Davidic king on the eternal throne.  
Two old covenants were straightway superseded; the curses of the Sinaitic covenant and the promised Davidic covenant.

### ***Process of covenant - entering***

Not only did making a covenant require sacrifice, but the sacrifice had to be dealt with in a certain way. The animal that was killed as the sacrifice was cut into two parts, and the two parts were placed opposite one another with a space between. Then the people that were making the covenant passed between the two parts of the sacrifice. This was the act by which they entered into covenant.  
This way of making a covenant is described in Jeremiah 34:18-20.

God entered into covenant with Abraham in this same way much earlier (Gen. 15: 7-18). Let's look at some significant aspects of this covenantal experience:

Note particularly verse 11- God ordained the sacrificial objects but it was Abraham's job to keep away the birds of prey so that he was not robbed of the benefits of the sacrifice

Verse 12- Abraham went through the darkness because God intended it to be a part of his spiritual experience. His terror & darkness was a preview of what his descendants would suffer in Egypt. In Verse 13 –the Lord explains to him what his descendants will suffer in Egypt

Verse 17- to the normal darkness of night is added the blackness of smoke belching from an oven. (In Scripture, an oven or furnace typifies intense suffering and a refining process). But there is also a flaming torch (the manifest presence of God) that passes between the pieces. It was at this time that God entered into covenant with Abraham.

(Note: At Sinai, there were some differences in the cutting of the covenant, notably the sprinkling of the blood which takes the place of the 'passing between the parts' of the sacrificed animal)

### **Spiritual significance of 'covenant' for us**

1. Every permanent relationship of God with man is based on covenant. God never enters into permanent relationship apart from covenant. God clearly defines those whom he will acknowledge as his people when he comes in his glory (see Ps. 50: 1-5. Note the words "those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice" in v.5). Literally, 'those who have *cut my covenant* on the basis of sacrifice'.

2. Covenant is only valid through death. Sacrifice was necessary because it symbolized the death of each party to the covenant. When one enters into covenant, one enters by death. As each party walked through between the pieces of the slain animal, he was effectively saying: "that is my death. That animal died as my representative. He died in my place. Now that I am in covenant, I have no more right to live". *The necessity of death to make a covenant valid is emphasized in Hebrews 9:16-17.*

It is impossible to be in covenant and remain alive. The death of the sacrificed animal is physical, but it symbolizes another form of death for the one who offers the sacrifice and passes through the pieces. The one who does this hereby renounces all right, from that moment onwards, to live for himself. As each party passes through the pieces of the sacrifice he says, in effect, "if need be, I will die for you. From now on, your interests take precedence over my own. What I own is no longer mine but yours. I no longer live for myself, I live for you".

3. Covenant is not an empty ritual in God's sight. It is a solid and sacred commitment. God called Abraham to keep his promise when he asked him for his son. Abraham did not falter. Only at the last moment did God intervene directly from heaven to stop him from actually slaying Isaac (Gen. 22). But it didn't end there. Two thousand years later, God in his turn fulfilled his part of the covenant. To meet the need of Abraham and his descendants, God offered up his only Son. But this time there was no last minute reprieve. Jesus laid down his life as the full price of redemption for Abraham and all his descendants.

4. God expects covenant to be honoured, even those made on the horizontal plane. He considers the breaking of covenant a very serious matter (see Amos 1:9 res: the breaking of the covenant of brotherhood made between Solomon and Hiram).

### **Reflections:**

Think about the implications of 'covenant' for us in our Christian walk; as brothers/sisters in Christ, as married couples, etc.

Would this understanding of covenant change our attitudes/behaviour?