



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Understanding the Bible: God's Covenants with His People

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JEREMIAH 31 / HEBREWS 8-9 / SELECTED PASSAGES

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The Bible can be difficult, if not impossible to understand if we do not keep in mind the theme or story of the whole. We have been considering this year that the “story” of the whole Bible is how a holy God makes sinful people right with Him through the work of Jesus Christ. There is a connecting theme that runs throughout the scriptures that helps us better understand the “big picture”. This is what the Bible calls covenants.

A covenant is a *promise or binding agreement between two or more parties, what we could call a contract. In Bible times covenants often involved obligations as well as the guarantee of blessings for faithfulness and consequences for unfaithfulness. A biblical covenant is in essence simply a sovereignly given promise (usually with stipulations). It is what God promises to and demands of His people. A key phrase that describes this relationship is “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; 2 Cor. 6:16).*

The importance of understanding the idea of covenants in scripture is seen even in the titles of the major divisions of the Bible, “Old Testament” and “New Testament”. Our word “testament” refers to those covenants God has made with His people.

There are a number of covenants recorded in the Old Testament, all of which point to Christ and what He would do for us. If we read the Old Testament with these covenants in mind, it will help us understand the “bigger story” behind the recorded events. Let us take just the briefest of overviews of these covenants.

GOD'S COVENANTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND HOW THEY POINT TO CHRIST

God's Covenant with Adam (Genesis 2:15-17) Some call this the covenant of works. Though the term covenant is not used, God makes an agreement with Adam including the terms he was to follow and the consequences should he disobey. Obviously, we know the rest of the story as Adam broke that covenant and consequently brought the consequences of that sin upon the whole human race. Even

then, God showed His grace in the promise of a Savior He made to Adam and Eve.¹

The New Testament calls Jesus “The Second Adam”. Adam was a representative of the human race. When he fell, the entire race fell. Paul teaches us that Adam *was “a type (or picture) of Christ who was to come”* (Rom. 5:14). Paul tells us that *“...Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned...”* (Rom. 5:12). Paul continues, *“So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”* (Rom. 5:18-19).

We should consider briefly how the life of Christ parallels that of Adam. Adam was given God's command to follow. Christ was sent to obey His Father in His life here on earth, which He did perfectly. Adam was tempted in the Garden. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) but He resisted and overcame it. Consequently, as our representative, His perfect obedience to God's commands could be credited to us. As the perfect sacrifice, the punishment for our sin could be placed upon Him so that our sin can be forgiven.

God's Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17) God made a covenant with Abraham, promising to make his descendants into a great nation, a land in which they would live, and a descendant through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. As we read through Genesis and Exodus, we see how God is at work fulfilling this covenant.

God's Covenant with Moses and the People of Israel (Exodus 19) We are all familiar with the account of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on top of Mount Sinai. We should remember that this is part of the covenant God made with the people of Israel. This is what is most often referred to by “the law” when the term is used throughout the Bible. But this covenant was more than just the laws and

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commands. It also provided the sacrifices for a covering of sin when those laws were broken. If we keep this covenant in mind as we read through Exodus and Leviticus, it will help us grasp what is taking place. Deuteronomy is a renewal of this covenant as the people were about to go into the Promise Land. This covenant points to and is fulfilled by Christ and what He did in His life and death on cross. He kept perfectly all the laws commanded and though innocent, became the offering for sin on our behalf.

God's Covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:8-17) This is the promise God made to King David that one of his descendants would rule over God's people forever. This promise is fulfilled by Christ who will rule and reign for all eternity. As Paul teaches in Philippians, ***"...At the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*** Philippians 2:10-11

We can better understand the Old Testament as we read it by keeping these covenants in mind. Much of what is written there describes how God goes about fulfilling His promises. We also read of the serious consequences for neglecting and disobeying covenant responsibilities. Most of all, we see how these all point to Christ and the New Covenant God provides through Him.

THE NEW COVENANT THROUGH CHRIST

In Jeremiah 31:31-33 God tells us of the new covenant He will make with His people.

³¹"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and

on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

In Hebrews 8 and 9 we are shown that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this new covenant of which Jeremiah was speaking. (I encourage you to read these chapters to see the connection). Jesus informed His disciples at the Last Supper that His death was the sign of this new covenant, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

The first covenant was a covenant of works. Since Adam's fall each of us have been sinners by nature and by action and so utterly fail in keeping this covenant. Those who think you are right with God by being good and doing the best you can are trying to operate under this covenant. The problem is with how good you have to be to fulfill it – perfect! Not one sin. Ever. The consequence is we are not part of God's people. We are separated from Him and face eternal judgment for our sin.

In God's covenant with Moses, that law was given to show us how sinful we are and how far short we fall from God's glory. The sacrifices were provided to point to the Great Sacrifice of Christ which provides complete forgiveness for our sin.

HOW DO WE TAKE PART IN THIS NEW COVENANT?

Through this study we hope you will get a view of the "big picture" that helps you better understand the Bible. More importantly, we want to answer the question of how we make sure we are part of this "New Covenant". The Bible makes it clear that we only enter into this covenant through faith in what Christ has done for us. Paul makes it clear:

- **FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH; AND THAT NOT OF YOURSELVES, IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD; NOT AS A RESULT OF WORKS, SO THAT NO ONE MAY BOAST. (EPHESIANS 2:8-9).**

¹ See our previous study, *Promises Made*, at <http://www.capitolcom.org/west-virginia/studies/767/2012/01/19/promises-made-genesis-3-15>