

Covenant

A covenant is an oath-bound promise whereby one party solemnly pledges to bless or serve another party in a specified way. Sometimes the keeping of the promise depends on the meeting of certain conditions by the party to whom the promise is made. On other occasions the promise is made unilaterally and unconditionally. The covenant concept is a central, unifying theme of Scripture, establishing and defining God's relationship with people in all ages.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word translated *covenant* is *berit*. The term probably derives from the verb *bara*, meaning to *bind*. The noun *berit* originally denoted a binding relationship between two parties in which each pledged to perform a service for the other. The New Testament, following the Septuagint, uniformly uses the Greek word *diatheke* for the covenant idea, avoiding the similar term *suntheke*, which would wrongly portray a covenant as a mutual contract or alliance rather than an oath-bound promise. This does not mean a covenant may not, in some cases, take on characteristics common to a mutual agreement or contract, but the essence of the covenant concept is clearly that of a binding pledge.

Covenant Rituals and Signs

The technical language used when covenants were made was to *cut a covenant* (*karat berit*). This terminology referred to ritual sacrifices that accompanied covenant making. Often sacrificed animals would be cut in two. In some covenant rituals part of the animal would be eaten by the covenanting parties and part burned in honor of their god. Sometimes the parties would walk symbolically between the pieces of the animal. In any case the shedding of blood in such rituals signified the solemnity of the covenant, each party vowing not to break the covenant on pain of death.

The making of covenants often included signs as well. A sign served as a memorial, reminding the parties of their promises. Abraham gave Abimelech seven ewe lambs "as my witness" to their covenant (Gen. 21:30); Jacob and Laban used a heap of stones (see Gen. 31:46-48); the sign of God's covenant with Noah was the rainbow (see Gen. 9:12-15); circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants (see Gen. 17:10-14; Ex. 12:47-48); and baptism is the sign of the new covenant (see Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:9-12).

Covenants Between Humans

The Bible records many covenants between human beings. Abraham and Abimelech made a covenant at Beersheba (see Gen. 21:22-34), Abraham promising to deal kindly with Abimelech's family and Abimelech promising to recognize Abraham's ownership of a well. Jacob and Laban made a covenant (see Gen. 31:44-54), swearing to do each other no harm. Jonathan and David cut a covenant in which Jonathan acknowledged David's right to the throne of Israel (see 1 Sam. 18:3; 23:18).

The Gibeonites, who were under God's ban to be slaughtered, deceived Joshua into a covenant to live in peace and protect them (see Josh. 9:15). Abner covenanted with David to lead the northern tribes of Israel to break with Ish-Bosheth and join David (see 2 Sam. 3:12-13). Solomon made a covenant of peace with Hiram, King of Tyre, committing their countries to mutual trade (see 1 Kings 5:12). King Asa led Judah to make a covenant to seek the Lord after many years of rebellion (see 2 Chron. 15:9-15).

There are many other human covenants in the Bible, some of which were ill advised. For example, Hosea warned Israel of God's judgment for its covenant with Assyria (see Hos. 12:1), and God punished Asa for a covenant with Ben-Hadad of Aram (see 2 Chron. 16:2-13). The dire consequences of these covenants were brought about because Israel relied on foreign military power rather than God (see 2 Chron. 16:7).

Of special interest among human covenants is marriage. Malachi 2:14 clearly indicates that marriage was understood as a covenant. In marriage one man and one woman vow to live together in a lifelong commitment (see Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-6), involving sexual union, sacrificial love, and mutual support.

Divine Covenants

Most significant in Scripture are several covenants God makes with man. These covenants provide a unifying principle for understanding the whole of Scripture and define the relationship between God and man. The heart of that relationship is found in the phrase, "I will be their God, and they will be My people" (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 37:27; also see Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 6:6-7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 4:20; Jer. 11:4; Ezek. 11:20).

The first covenant God made is the covenant of redemption, a covenant God the Father established with God the Son to redeem fallen humanity. In 2 Timothy 1:9-10 we learn that God has saved us not by works but by grace, "which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began." And in Titus 1:2 Paul declared that God promised the elect eternal life "before time began." The term *covenant* is not here, but the concept of an oath-bound promise is evident. This promise was made to Christ, who came to fulfill an eternal plan to save those the Father gave Him (see John 6:37-40; 17:1-5). God the Father bestowed (literally, covenanted) on Him a kingdom that He in turn bestowed on His disciples (see Luke 22:28-30).

The biblical covenant that appears first is the Edenic covenant, or covenant of works, which God made with Adam in the garden of Eden (see Gen. 2:15-17). Hosea 6:6-7 plainly states that this arrangement was a covenant. God promised humans in their state of innocence that He would give them everlasting life on the condition of their perfect obedience. Obedience would be measured by whether they kept God's command to refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, thus breaking this covenant and falling under its terrible curse: "on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die" (Gen. 2:17).

It is important to note that the covenant of works provided no method of restoration. Because it demanded perfection, this covenant, once broken, left Adam and his posterity without hope. It is in this context that we find the inauguration of another covenant, the covenant of grace. After the fall God cursed the serpent and promised the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head, though his own heel would be bruised (see Gen. 3:15). This promise was an unconditional guarantee that God would graciously rescue fallen humanity from the curse of the covenant of works. The New Testament makes clear that the seed of woman who fulfills this promise is Christ (see Gal. 3:19; Col. 2:13-15; 1 John 3:8). The covenant of grace, then, is God's promise to save sinful humanity from the fall's curse by grace alone through the redemptive work of Christ. This redemptive work is foreshadowed even in Genesis 3, where God apparently slays an animal to provide coverings for Adam and Eve's nakedness (see v. 21).

Genesis 4–6 describes the rapid moral decline of the human race after the fall that led God to destroy most of them with a flood. However, "Noah, however, found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8), and God preserved the human race by instructing him to build an ark in which he and his family and the animal species could survive the floodwaters. After the flood God established the Noahic covenant (see Gen. 9:9-17), promising never again to flood the earth. This covenant called for no human response. God simply and graciously bound himself to preserve the human race and other living creatures.

The next biblical covenant is the Abrahamic covenant (see Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-14; 22:15-18). God called Abraham out of Ur to go to Canaan, promising to make him a great nation, which in turn would bless all nations (see Gen. 12:1-3). The utter graciousness of this covenant is clearly seen in the ratification ceremony in Genesis 15. God promised the aging Abraham that he would have a son and heir from his own body and that Abraham would inherit the land of Canaan. Abraham believed God, which resulted in God's declaring him righteous (see v. 6). Yet Abraham desired confirmation, asking, "How can I know that I will possess it?" (v. 8). In response God had Abraham cut several animals in two in accordance with the custom for cutting a covenant. However, unlike the custom, God alone passed between the animal pieces, signifying that His promise was unconditional and certified by His own vow to suffer violent death if He failed to keep his promise to Abraham. God repeated His oath in Genesis 22:18, further adding that it would be through Abraham's seed that all nations would someday be blessed. Paul applied the singular noun *seed* as a reference to Christ (see Gal. 3:16). It was through Christ, Abraham's prophesied descendent, that the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant would come to every nation. Paul understood that the blessing the nations receive is, like Abraham, to be justified by faith alone rather than works and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Gal. 3:8-14).

In the course of time, Abraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt. They cried out to God for deliverance, and because God "remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod. 2:24, NASB), He sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the people out of bondage. Once free, the Israelites gathered at Mount Sinai. There God established with them the Sinai or Mosaic covenant (see Ex. 19:5). This covenant bears the closest resemblance to the suzerainty treaties found in other ancient Near Eastern nations. In such treaties the

suzerain (overlord or king) would pledge to provide benevolent rule and protection to conquered peoples in exchange for their loyalty. Suzerainty treaties had certain stylized features that are paralleled in the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 19-23). These features include—

- a historical prologue reviewing the past relationship between the parties;
- a statement of obligations the parties have to each other;
- provisions for occasionally reading the treaty in public;
- lists of blessings and curses to follow from keeping or breaking the treaty.

Though the Mosaic covenant followed this familiar pattern, its purpose and content differed significantly. For one thing, the Mosaic covenant was brought about not by an act of conquest but by God's gracious deliverance of Israel from bondage. Further, God's covenant with Israel established not simply an agreement between a suzerain and his vassals but an intimate relationship based on loyal love (Hebrew, *chesed*).

The unique feature of the Mosaic covenant was the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments (see Ex. 20:10-17). By promulgating the law, God established Israel as a distinct people and nation, existing under His own theocratic rule. God promised Israel that they would be His special possession, His holy nation, and the Lord promised to be their God (see Ex. 19:5-6; 20:2). This promise was conditioned on Israel's obedience to the law. God's grace singled out Israel as the recipient of this covenant (see Deut. 7:7), but they were warned that the temporal blessings promised would be theirs only if they kept His commandments (see Deut. 7:12-26; 28:1-14). Failure to keep God's commandments would result in calamitous curses, including being divorced by God and no longer being His special people (see Deut. 8:19-20; 28:15-68; Jer. 3:6-8; Hos. 1:1-8). Under the Mosaic covenant Israel repeatedly rebelled against God, incurring divine wrath on numerous occasions, but God mercifully limited the severity of judgment because of His promise to Abraham (see 2 Kings 13:22-23). However, God finally brought judgment, imposing the curses first on Israel (722 B.C.) and then on Judah (586 B.C.). But again, because of His unconditional promises to Abraham and David, God preserved a remnant of Judah and brought them back to Palestine (see 1 Kings 11:11-13; Neh. 9:7-8,32).

The New Testament adds insight into the meaning and significance of the Mosaic covenant. Hebrews indicates that the covenant's stipulations for animal sacrifices were "a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 10:1) and that they were not efficacious in atoning for sin (see vv. 1-4). Rather, they were symbolic pointers to the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ that alone can wash away sins (see Heb. 10:11-14). Paul explains that the Mosaic covenant was added to the Abrahamic covenant "until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come" (Gal. 3:19). That is, God established the Mosaic covenant with national Israel as a temporary arrangement whose purpose would be completed at the first coming of Christ. Further, the purpose of this covenant was that the law would serve as "our guardian until Christ" (Gal. 3:24). It does so by giving God's righteous demands, which sinners are incapable of keeping (see Rom. 5:13,20; 8:7-8) and the breaking of which earns them the wrath of God. Realizing their helplessness before the law, penitent sinners may see their need of a Savior and be driven to Christ.

God made another unconditional covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:1-17; 23:1-5). In the Davidic covenant God promised that he would establish for David a perpetual kingdom, one of his descendants sitting on the throne of Israel forever. Moreover, God promised David's seed, "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me" (2 Sam. 7:14, NASB). The promise is unconditional, God being determined to keep it despite the wickedness of subsequent kings descended from David (see 1 Kings 11:11-13; 2 Kings 20:4-6). Of course, the eventual destruction of the Davidic dynasty seems to call into question the perpetuity of this covenant, but the prophets looked forward to the eventual restoration of David's kingdom (see Amos 9:11).

The New Testament also provides insight into the Davidic covenant. For example, several New Testament authors used the theme of the king's sonship to God to connect the Davidic king to Jesus Christ (see Ps. 2:6-7; Heb. 1:5-6; Acts 13:32-34; Rom. 1:3-4). As the actual Son of God, He is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant with David. Further, Christ's resurrection and ascension mark His coronation as the Davidic King seated on David's throne (see Acts 2:29-36). And in Acts 15:13-18 James said the establishment of the church with the influx of Gentile converts marked the restoration of David's kingdom prophesied by Amos (see Amos 9:11-12).

Finally, God established what both testaments call the new covenant. Jeremiah was the first to speak of it (see Jer. 31:27-34). In the wake of Israel's covenant-breaking disobedience, God promised that He would someday establish a new covenant with Israel unlike the old covenant it broke. In this new covenant God said, "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 ... [and] they will all know Me ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (vv. 33-34, NASB). Ezekiel echoed this theme, saying in the new covenant God would "give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you ... and cause you to walk in My statutes" (Ezek. 36:26-27, NASB). This new covenant is contrasted with the old Mosaic covenant and promises several blessings the old covenant could not provide:

- Regeneration or new birth
- The full forgiveness of sins
- An intimate knowledge of God
- The assurance that this new covenant is unbreakable

The promises of the new covenant signify the fulfillment of all of the redemptive purposes God established in the covenant of grace, bringing to an end the curse of the fall and providing full salvation for the human race.

Jesus announced the fulfillment of the new covenant in His institution of the Lord's Supper (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25). Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross, which the Lord's Supper symbolizes, brought the new covenant into being and made the old covenant obsolete (see Heb. 8:6-13; 9:11-15). In the new covenant Christ brought to fulfillment the promises and purposes of the previous covenants. Christ was the seed of the woman who God promised would crush the serpent's head; He was the seed of Abraham who would bless

all nations; He was the goal of the Mosaic law; He was the King who would sit forever on David's throne. Moreover, as Christ was "Immanuel" or "God with us" (Matt. 1:23; see also John 1:14), He brought to its consummation the intercovenantal theme that God "will be their God, and they will be [His] people" (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 37:27). Also, the new covenant fulfilled all of the Old Testament promises to Israel in the life and ministry of the new Israel, the church (see Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Acts 15:14-17; Heb. 11:8-16; Rev. 21:12-14). Of course, not all of the blessings of the new covenant have been fully realized. The ultimate consummation of the new covenant awaits the return of Christ.

The Unity of the Divine Covenants

Despite their differences the divine covenants exhibit a structural and thematic unity that unifies the whole of Scripture. Their structural unity is seen in the fact that each successive divine covenant grew from and depended on the previous ones. Each covenant formed a new phase in one overarching divine plan. Both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace were the historical outworking of the more fundamental covenant of redemption. The covenant of grace, in which God unilaterally promised to graciously redeem fallen humanity, presupposed the failure of the covenant of works. But both of these covenants depended on the eternal covenant made between God the Father and God the Son to redeem sinners from sin and misery. Before time began, God promised to save a sinful human race. That promise necessitated the establishment of the covenants of works and grace in history.

All of the subsequent divine covenants were stages of the covenant of grace, in which God progressively unfolded the promise made in Genesis 3:15. The covenant with Noah preserved the human race from destruction so that the seed of the woman might be born. It demonstrated the grace of God in that God promised to forbear patiently with the human race until the coming of Christ (see Acts 17:30). The Abrahamic covenant followed from the covenant of grace as well, creating a historical lineage through which the promised seed would come. In all subsequent covenants God graciously preserved this lineage despite the wickedness of Abraham's descendants. The Mosaic covenant was also part of the covenant of grace and an extension of the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, the Scriptures explicitly state that the Mosaic covenant was established because God "remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex. 2:24). By delivering Israel from Egypt and forming them into a nation through the promulgation of the law, God established an arrangement in which all humankind might see their inability to live up to the covenant of works and thus realize their need for a Savior. Within the context of national Israel, God also founded the Davidic covenant, which provided the divine monarchy through which God would govern His redeemed people for all eternity. God also kept this covenant unconditionally, preserving the rebellious Hebrew nation and bringing them back from exile "for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (2 Kings 20:6, NASB). Finally, the new covenant brought the covenant of grace to its consummation with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, who is the promised seed of the covenant of grace. Thus, in the progressive revelation of these covenants, we can see the unfolding of one eternal plan.

The unity of the covenants is further seen in the single theme that is present in all of them: “I will be their God, and they will be My people” (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 37:27; see Gen. 17:7-8). The divine covenants were designed to bring fallen human beings into intimate a personal relationship with God. This theme is developed in Scripture in close connection with the Immanuel principle that God actually dwells in the midst of his people. The Old Testament tabernacle was the place where God met personally with Israel. When the tabernacle was consecrated, God Himself connected the Immanuel principle with the covenant theme: “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God” (Ex. 29:45, NASB). Christ embodied the consummate form of this principle in the new covenant. He is called “Immanuel, which is translated ‘God with us’ ” (Matt. 1:23), and John explicitly stated that in Christ God “became flesh and took up residence [literally, tabernacled] among us” (John 1:14). The final mention of this covenant theme is found in Revelation 21:3. After the second coming of Christ, we find God’s covenant promise fully and finally realized: “Look! God’s dwelling is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.”

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