

Understanding God's Covenants

*“All the paths of
the LORD are
mercy and truth
unto such as keep
his covenant and
his testimonies.”
—Psalm 25:10*

THE SCRIPTURAL USE OF

the term covenant, as descriptive of the relationship between God and his human creation, conveys the idea of being in harmony with him. Thus, when one enters into covenant relationship with God it means that he agrees to do God's will, and God has agreed to accept him and bless him because of this mutual understanding. The Scriptures also use the term covenant with reference to God's solemn promise to do certain things for his creatures.

To a large extent the term covenant, as used by God, is pictorial in that it conveys to our minds a state of harmony with the Creator, in contrast to a condition of alienation from him. It does not mean that an individual, in entering into covenant relationship with God, signs a literal document or agreement, but rather that in his heart he gives assent to the divine will and determines faithfully to obey that will.

FIVE COVENANTS

There are five special covenants referred to in the Bible related to God's plan. The first of these describes the relationship which existed between Adam and the Creator. The prophet speaks of this, saying, "But they [the Israelites] like Adam have transgressed the covenant." (Hos. 6:7, *Revised Version*) Adam's relationship with God was established by a covenant of obedience from the time of his creation. God's law was given to him, and he was given the ability to keep that law because he was created perfect. Adam's part in this covenant was to obey his Creator. This was the least he could do to show his appreciation for his existence and for the manifold blessings of life bestowed upon him. Adam would continue to live as long as he obeyed God's law.

Adam, however, broke that original covenant and by his disobedience brought upon himself, and all of his progeny, the penalty of death. God was not bound to continue Adam's life after he had violated the covenant to which he was a party. Under this covenant it was necessary for Adam to pay for his wrongdoing, and the only means of paying was by the surrender of his life. Thus, by his breaking of the covenant, Adam lost his special relationship with the Creator, and also lost life.—Gen. 2:15-17; 3:17-19; Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12

The second covenant mentioned in the Scriptures is that recorded in Genesis 9:8-17. It is the covenant which God established with Noah, assuring him that never again would all flesh be destroyed by a flood of waters. God sealed this covenant with the outward sign of the rainbow. It was a one-sided

covenant in the sense that it represented only that which God promised to do. The promise was made to Noah without asking him to obligate himself in any way in connection therewith.

The third covenant is the great oath-bound covenant made with Abraham and his offspring, or “seed,” by which God promised to bless all mankind. The apostle, speaking of this, says that because God “could swear by no greater, he swore by himself,” thus sealing this covenant by his oath. (Heb. 6:13; Gen. 22:16) This divine promise to Abraham was two-fold: (1) Abraham’s seed was to inherit the land of promise; and (2) “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 13:14-17; 17:8; 22:18) In Genesis 15:18, this oath-bound promise to Abraham is specifically called a covenant, and in Galatians 3:17 (*New American Standard Bible*), the Apostle Paul also calls it a covenant.

Later, another covenant is brought to our attention in the Scriptures. This is the Law Covenant, entered into between God and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. (Exod. 24:3,7,8) This covenant promised life to Israel in return for obedience to its terms. (Deut. 30:19) However, as noted earlier from Hosea 6:7, the Israelites, like Adam, broke God’s covenant. Because the Israelites did not faithfully keep their part of the covenant they failed to receive the blessing of life which God promised as his part of the agreement. While they failed to obtain life under this covenant, nevertheless they were furnished many valuable lessons. The apostle told the early Jewish Christians that the Law was to be a “schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.”—Gal. 3:19,24

While not many Israelites learned the real lesson of the Law—that is, their need of Christ as a Redeemer—yet God is not finished dealing with them. When the proper time comes for their eyes to be opened, the lessons of the Law will be of inestimable value to them. Meanwhile we, who can look back upon Israel's failure, are able to appreciate the lesson that only through the Redeemer, Christ Jesus, is it possible for any member of the fallen race to come back into harmony with the Creator and live.—Acts 4:10-12

The final great covenant mentioned in the Scriptures is described in Jeremiah 31:31-34 as a New Covenant. The prophet explains the reason for its name, saying that it is a New Covenant because it takes the place of the original Law Covenant. This covenant, the Scriptures show, is to be made with those who previously had participated in the covenant inaugurated at Mount Sinai. The principal facts concerning the New Covenant are that it is made with the “house of Israel and with the house of Judah,” and that the law of that covenant is to be written in the inward parts and in the hearts of the people.

The prophet also shows that when this covenant is instituted its effects will be so universal that all, Jew and Gentile alike, shall come to know the Lord “from the least ... unto the greatest.” Hence it will mean the re-establishment of that original covenant relationship which existed between God and father Adam. It will include Adam and the entire race that lost life because of his disobedience, for Jesus died “the just for the unjust [Adam and his posterity].”—I Pet. 3:18

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Examining more carefully God's covenant with Abraham, we notice that it contains not only the promise of blessing, but also provides for the development of the "seed" through which the blessings are to be dispensed. The Apostle Paul furnishes us with considerable information concerning the larger meaning of this covenant. In Galatians 3:16, he identifies Jesus as the seed of promise, and in verses 27 and 29 of this same chapter he explains that the followers of Jesus who become members of his body, or church, by being baptized into death with him, are also to be considered as a part of the promised seed.

In the 4th chapter of Galatians, the apostle discusses the experiences of Abraham in connection with the birth of his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, referring to these as an allegory. The Israelites, Paul reminds us, were the natural descendants of Abraham, and as such were pictured by Ishmael, the son of Abraham's bondmaid, Hagar. This finds its comparison in the Law Covenant, which brought bondage to Israel, the natural descendants of Abraham. —vss. 22-25

The apostle further explains that in this allegory, Sarah, Abraham's lawful wife who gave birth to Isaac, represents the covenant arrangements by which the true seed of promise is brought forth. This we often refer to as the "Sarah feature" of the Abrahamic Covenant. Then the apostle adds, "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise." (vss. 22,23,26-28) It is significant also that Isaac, the natural seed of promise, was offered in sacrifice. While God did not permit the patriarch

actually to slay his son, nevertheless the sacrifice was made in sufficient fullness to warrant our looking upon it as prefiguring the sacrifice of Jesus. —Gen. 22:1-12; Heb. 11:17-19

God's covenant in which he promised to bless all the families of the earth also calls for the offering of sacrifice. No blessing should be considered sufficiently far-reaching to fulfill this wondrous promise to Abraham except the blessing of everlasting life, yet those whom he promised to bless were under condemnation to Adamic death. This clearly implies that through the seed of promise, by which the blessings were to reach mankind, there would of necessity be a provision for the cancellation of the death penalty, which prevents mankind from enjoying everlasting life.

In father Abraham's offering of his son Isaac as a sacrifice, we have a beautiful illustration of the fact that in order for the Heavenly Father to fulfill his promise to bless mankind he would offer up his own Son in sacrifice. (John 3:16,17) Isaac's willing acquiescence in his father's obedience to God exemplifies the fact that Jesus would, himself, gladly cooperate with his Father by voluntarily laying down his life, that those whom he came into the world to bless might live.

As already noted, the Apostle Paul includes the church as a part of the greater Isaac, or seed of promise, saying, "We, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise." (Gal. 4:28) The offering up of Isaac as a sacrifice, therefore, not only foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, the Head of the church, but also prefigured the sacrifice of his consecrated footstep followers. In this picture,

only the sacrifice of Jesus has redemptive value, or merit, to cancel sins. However, the church is also invited to sacrifice in order to prepare them to share in the work of the Messianic kingdom of blessing to all the world.

Therefore, we see that the offering of sacrifice is one of the necessary qualifications to become a part of the spiritual seed of Abraham. In Psalm 50:5, the Lord says, "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." To this Paul adds, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God." (Rom. 12:1) Thus it is evident that true Christians enter into the covenant under which the seed of promise is developed by virtue of joining in sacrifice necessary for the entire seed class to be prepared for the eventual blessing of all mankind.

"RECEIVING A KINGDOM"

We have another example in the Scriptures of the church being associated with a phase of God's plan, namely, with the kingdom of God. Hebrews 12:28 reads: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." Those who have misunderstood God's plan to the point of believing that God's kingdom, through Christ, was established at Pentecost naturally would use this text to prove such a viewpoint. However, we know that the actual establishment of the kingdom for the blessing of the people is still future. Yet the apostle says that we have been given

a kingdom. This means simply that we have been given the opportunity of becoming kings in that kingdom, and that in accepting the invitation to sacrifice with Christ we are being prepared for the work of that kingdom when it is established.

One of the obvious proofs that the kingdom of Christ was not established at Pentecost is the fact that the many promises of kingdom blessings have not been realized by the people. The same is true concerning the New Covenant. It is to be established with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, with its blessings extending to all nations. It calls for the reconciliation of all the willing of mankind to God, so complete and universal that, according to the prophet, no one will need to say to his neighbor, "Know the LORD," for all shall know him "from the least ... unto the greatest." (Jer. 31:34) Surely now, nearly two thousand years since Pentecost, the nations and people in general are as far away as they have ever been from "knowing the Lord."

The Scriptures show that the relationship of Christians to the kingdom of Christ is to be that of joint-heirs with him as kings and priests. (Rev. 20:6; I Pet. 2:9) Similarly, our relationship to the New Covenant is to be as ministers of reconciliation, sharing with Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, in the work of bringing mankind back to human perfection. (II Cor. 5:18; Heb. 12:24) The church, then, as the seed of Abraham, is not brought forth under the terms of the New Covenant, but is a spiritual class developed upon the basis of sacrifice, to be ministers or servants of that covenant. From this standpoint, perfect harmony is found in

all the prophetic teachings relative to the New Covenant.

MINISTERS OF THE NEW COVENANT

Hebrews 8:6 is another enlightening statement: “But now hath he [Christ] obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.” Notice that Jesus’ ministry of the “better” New Covenant is that of Mediator. Couple with this the statement of II Corinthians 3:6 (*RV*) where the same apostle tells us that we also are made “sufficient as ministers of a new covenant,” and we have the proper setting of the church in the entire picture; namely, that the church, with Jesus as its Head, are the executors, the ministers, or servants of the New Covenant, established for the express purpose of blessing the people who will come under that covenant arrangement.

The preparatory work for establishing the New Covenant began with the sacrificial ministry of Jesus. As students of the Bible we need always to guard against the human tendency of circumscribing God’s works by attempting to bring them within the scope of our own limited viewpoint. The establishment of the old Law Covenant at Sinai required, in all, but a few days, but the making of the New Covenant which takes its place has required, first, nearly two thousand years during which the preparatory sacrificial arrangements of the covenant are being carried out. Then will come the thousand years of Christ’s reign during which the terms of the covenant will be made known to the house of Israel and all nations, and upon the basis of that

knowledge the peoples of earth will be brought back into harmony with their Creator.

The apostle's lesson in II Corinthians 3, where he tells us that we are being made ministers of the New Covenant, indicates a two-fold ministry. First, there is the sacrificial phase of that ministry. As ministers of reconciliation with Jesus, we share in the sacrificial work of this preparatory age. Then there is the "glory" phase of the ministry, which Paul indicates was prefigured by the glory of Moses' countenance when he came down from Sinai bearing the tables of the Law. This glory, Paul shows, is as yet something for which the church merely hopes. (vss. 7-12) It is not now a reality. The work of the ministry while the church is still in the flesh is one of sacrifice and suffering. The ministry of the New Covenant in glory will follow the completion of the church when glorified together with Christ.

Paul's lesson of the typical and antitypical covenants as set forth in II Corinthians 3:3-12 refers to the tables of stone upon which the law of the old covenant was written. He explains that the church's ministry of the New Covenant is similar to the service rendered by those tables of stone. In verse 3 he compares those tables with the fleshly "tables of the heart" on which the law of the New Covenant—the law of love—is written. (vs. 3) A moment's reflection on the fact that the law of the old covenant was written on tables of stone before the covenant itself was established with the people should be sufficient to convince us that the New Covenant cannot be inaugurated until the Christians' "tables of the heart" are prepared and the church appears with Christ in glory—as was foreshadowed by Moses

coming down from the mount bearing the literal tables of stone.

Thus we see that the present work since Pentecost has been the writing of God's law in the hearts of those who, when in glory with Jesus, are to serve as able ministers of the New Covenant. This does not mean that the church is developed under that covenant, but rather, is now being prepared to administer its laws to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah, and through them to the whole world. An attorney who aids in making a contract or covenant between two or more parties must first acquaint himself thoroughly with the terms of the contract to be executed. Thus the church must do likewise in order to be properly qualified for her future work of reconciliation.

This preparatory work is beautifully foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Moses took the two tables of stone up into the mount, and we read, "The LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."—Exod. 34:5-7

This proclamation of God's glory has reflected in it all the elements of God's character as they are revealed to the church through God's plan of salvation for mankind. As this proclamation was made

to Moses, the law of God was written on, and testified by, the literal tables of stone. How clearly this foreshadows the work and purpose of God during this present age. Since Pentecost the Truth of God's plan has been proclaimed. Those who have heard it and responded in full consecration, yielding themselves to its hallowed influence, are having the righteousness of God, his law, written in their hearts. Thus they are being prepared to share with Christ in the work of enlightening and blessing the world under the New Covenant, even as the tables of stone in the hands of Moses bore the message of the Law to Israel under their covenant arrangement.

The great economy of God is seen in the fact that the proclaiming of the Truth, the Gospel message, is done by the church. Faithfulness in this calls for the laying down of life itself in sacrifice and service to the Lord. Thus it is that the sacrificial phase of the church's ministry of the New Covenant is utilized in preparation for the blessings of that covenant to be shed abroad to all mankind in the kingdom. Hence, the shed blood of Christ's sacrifice is said to be the blood of the New Covenant, which makes acceptable the sacrifice of those who will share with Christ in the administration of that covenant. (Luke 22:20, *RV*) Later, Jesus' blood will wipe away the sins of those who receive restitution to life under the terms of the New Covenant.—I John 2:2; John 1:29

FOR THIS CAUSE

A further corroborating explanation of the two-fold manner in which Christ's blood is the blood of the New Covenant is set forth in Hebrews 9:13-15.

The 13th and 14th verses show that the blood of Christ is for the purifying of our flesh in order that our service to God—which is a service preparatory to the New Covenant—might be acceptable. In verse 15 he adds: “And for this cause,” that is, purification from sin, “he is the mediator of the new testament [Greek: covenant], that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first [covenant], they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

The lesson here is plain. Not only does the blood of Christ purify the church, but for this cause, namely the purging of sins, Jesus will mediate the New Covenant in order that those who transgressed the law of the old covenant may also be purged of their sins. In this way the Jewish nation, whose people were “called” under the Law Covenant, will receive the fulfillment of the promise of eternal inheritance.

That this 15th verse is not describing the development of the true church under the New Covenant is obvious for the reason that the followers of the Master are not those who transgressed under the old Law Covenant, “the first testament [covenant].” Therefore, the expression, “those which are called,” is a reference to the Jewish nation. These were a called people, called to receive an eternal inheritance. In Romans 11:26-29, Paul discusses this same subject showing not only that the call of natural Israel is to be made good, but that this will be accomplished through the New Covenant, under which, as God promised, the sins of Israel will be taken away.

The purification of the church by the blood of the New Covenant has to do with preparing its servants. It does not mean that Christians are under that covenant. In Hebrews 9:9, referring to the high priest entering into the Most Holy once every year, the apostle says, "Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect." Indeed, that was one of the great weaknesses of the Law Covenant; the sacrifices then offered could not make its servants perfect. Having imperfect servants, the covenant could not produce the desired results on behalf of those who were served by it.

How different it will be with the New Covenant! Its servants are all to be perfect. Jesus, the great High Priest and Mediator, was already perfect; and through the merit of his perfect sacrifice, the church, his "brethren," are made "completely" one with him. (John 17:21-23, *International Standard Version*; Eph. 4:11-13) This is the preparatory work to the establishment of the New Covenant, which work has been in progress since the beginning of the Christian age at Pentecost—namely, the preparation and development of the New Covenant's future servants and ministers, those who will be given the "ministry of reconciliation."—II Cor. 5:18

The administration of the New Covenant will be in the hands of Jesus and his church, the spiritual phase of the kingdom in glory (Rev. 21:1,2) The final and complete establishment of that covenant with the people will mean that all mankind has been restored to perfect harmony and oneness with the Creator. The terms of the covenant will be inscribed,

as it were, in the very hearts of the people. They will be restored in mental, moral, and physical perfection to the image of God, in which Adam was originally created.—Gen. 1:26,27

At the end of the Messianic Age, the human race will be in a position of covenant relationship with God similar to that enjoyed by father Adam before he sinned. God's plan to bring about this work of restoration will have been completed. The blessings promised under the New Covenant will have been dispensed by Jesus and his church, who will have been brought forth under the Sarah feature of the Abrahamic covenant upon the basis of becoming part of the promised "seed" which will bless all mankind.

What a glorious prospect is thus held out to the followers of Jesus now! We still have the opportunity of proving our worthiness of being a part of the Isaac, or promised seed, class. Let us remember that we prove our worthiness of this exalted position in the divine program of reconciling a lost and sin-sick world upon the basis of our willingness to lay down our lives in sacrifice. May we be faithful to this great privilege, "even unto death."—Rev. 2:10 ■