

# Covenants

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If we said the word “covenant” to most Americans, what would probably come to their minds would be housing covenants. To them, a covenant is something that says that you aren’t allowed to keep a ‘79 El Camino up on cinder blocks in your front yard, or else you start getting nastygrams from the neighborhood association. It’s one of those omnipresent, occasionally tedious, parts of suburban life. Certainly, covenants aren’t something to get excited about.

It would shock many of those same Americans to learn that one of the most important abstract concepts in the entire Bible is the concept of the covenant. In fact, it is fair to say that unless we understand what a covenant is and how it operates Scripturally, we will not be able to understand the Scripture. We won’t understand the way that God interacted with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and we won’t know what God expects us to do today. Even the death of Jesus on the cross will lose a significant portion of its meaning for us unless we look at that death in terms of covenant.

Clearly, then, the concept of the covenant is not one that we can afford to overlook. However, neither are we going to be able to be able to repeat everything that the Bible says on the topic in one session. According to my computer concordance, in the New King James version of the Bible, the word “covenant” is repeated 293 times. However, we need to start somewhere. This morning, then, let’s take a few minutes considering the meaning and implications of covenant.

## Covenants Generally.

The most logical place to begin this study is by considering what the word says about covenants generally. In a broad sense, a covenant is any agreement between two parties. However, when the Scripture uses the word covenant, it is usually talking about an agreement **BETWEEN MAN AND GOD**. We see one instance of such an agreement in Genesis 15:18. This verse appears toward the end of one of the weirder stories from the life of Abraham. It involves animals chopped in half, terrifying dreams, and a flaming torch and smoking oven flying between the pieces of the chopped-up animals. Finally, at the end of all of that, God makes a covenant with Abraham. He promises him that He will give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants. We learn later that under the covenant, God also instructs Abraham to circumcise himself and his male descendants. This is the way that Biblical covenants work. The people involved promise to do something, and God promises to bless them in some way if they do.

We see here that one of the most important features of a covenant is that it **IMPOSES OBLIGATIONS ON MAN**. This is quite clear at the inauguration of a later covenant, God’s covenant with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Read with me from Exodus 24:7-8. Moses has just received the first installment of God’s law for Israel, a core collection of laws called the Book of the Covenant. It includes the Ten Commandments and laws like that. Moses then goes down the mountain, reads the Book of the Covenant to the assembled people, and asks them whether they will agree to obey it. They say they will, and in response, Moses splashes them with blood and tells them they’ve made a covenant with God.

This is the way that God dealt with man 3500 years ago, and it is still the way that God deals with man today. God is not big into unconditional promises. In fact, His unconditional promises tend to be depressing things that don’t sound beneficial, like, “You’re going to die and stand before Me in judgment.” Instead, when God makes promises that are actually things that we want, He makes those promises in a covenant context. He says, “I will do this for you, but only if you do these things for Me first.” All our interactions with God as Christians are governed by our covenant with Him.

Of course, covenants aren’t just God bossing us around with no return for us. Instead, covenants actually **IMPOSE OBLIGATIONS ON GOD**. Once God makes a covenant with man, He is required to keep the terms of that covenant. We see the promise that God makes in exchange for the agreement of the nation of Israel in Exodus 19:5. If Israel will keep the terms of the covenant by following the law that God has handed down, they will become God’s own special people, and He will exalt them above all the nations of the earth. He will protect them from their foreign enemies, prosper them materially, and even send rain to them in appropriate amounts and seasons. None of these blessings were things the Israelites could secure for themselves, but God had to secure those blessings for them, just so long as His people were faithful to keep the covenant. If they didn’t, God didn’t have to hold up His end either.

The covenant promises that God makes to Christians operate in the same way. However, our promises are even better than the ones the Israelites got. Instead of divine weather control, we get forgiveness of sins, the right to pray, and the guarantee of eternal life in heaven with God. However, because these are covenant promises, they are contingent, not absolute. God does not require perfect law-keeping from us as part of our covenant, but He does require that we remain faithful to Him throughout our lives. If we don’t do that, God will not fulfill His promises to us either.

Clearly, a covenant with God is no small thing. Who of us would be presumptuous enough to march up to the omnipotent Lord of heaven and earth and demand that He strike a bargain with us? This is why covenants in the Bible **REQUIRED A MEDIATOR**. We learn who the mediator for the Sinai covenant was from Exodus 20:18. Remember, all of this discussion takes place at the foot of the mountain shortly after the children of Israel arrived there, and up on top of the mountain, there is an all-timer of a fireworks display going on. There is thunder, lightning, smoke, fire,

earthquake, and the sound of a trumpet that is so loud that the Israelites quake to hear it. God is up on top of that mountain, and there ain't no way that the people are going anywhere near it. They are scared to death, and so they send Moses up to talk to God for them. Moses is going to be their go-between. He will be their mediator.

Today, we don't have a Sinai experience to remind us of how terrifying God is, but a moment's thought will reveal that He should be no less frightening to us. He is so powerful that He spoke countless light-years of universe into existence with a single word. He literally knows everything about us and everyone else, and He is so holy that He must destroy any sinner who enters His presence. To put it another way, if God lived across the street from us, we would not be trying to sell Him Girl Scout cookies! We are sinners. We need a go-between, just like the Israelites did.

Finally, every covenant is **SEALED WITH BLOOD**. Look at the testimony of the Hebrews writer in Hebrews 9:18-20. We've already seen this in a couple of the passages we looked at. Abraham had to chop the animals in half to get blood. Later, he bled himself when he was circumcised. Moses sacrificed a whole bunch of oxen and threw the blood on the people when they agreed to the Sinai covenant. This is not coincidence. Instead, blood was a necessary part of every covenant between man and God. Here's why: Scripturally speaking, the life of any animal is in its blood. In the Bible, blood represents life. When blood was shed during the covenant-making process, it showed that the covenant was a life-and-death matter. When Abraham chopped all of those animals in half, he was saying, "If I violate the covenant that I am making with God, may my lifeblood be shed like the lifeblood of these creatures." Today, we're far removed from all the bloodshed of an agricultural society, but our covenant with God is still a blood covenant, and still just as serious.

### Christ and the Covenant

To people who don't know the Bible very well, it's not immediately clear what all of this ancient, ominous, blood-soaked language about covenants has to do with us. That's why we need to turn our attention next to Christ and the covenant. Everything that we've said doesn't just apply to Abraham, Moses, and the Israelites. It applies just as fully to us and our covenant with God. This covenant was enacted when Jesus **SHED HIS BLOOD** on the cross. This is brought out, among other places, by Hebrews 13:12. In order for God to make a covenant with man, the stage must be set. Just like Abraham's covenant and Moses' covenant were witnessed with blood, so too the covenant of Christ had to be witnessed with blood. However, there was a crucial difference between Christ's covenant and its predecessors. Both Abraham's covenant and the Sinai covenant were imperfect. They were never intended to last forever, so they could be inaugurated with the blood of bulls and goats. The covenant of Christ, however, was meant to be perfect. It was to be a covenant that would remain in force for as long as the earth remained. Because of that, it wasn't enough to inaugurate that covenant with animal blood. Only the lifeblood of the Son of God Himself could solemnize it.

Once Jesus had offered His own life, He took His blood and **ENTERED THE HOLY PLACE**. Read with me from Hebrews 9:11-12. If you'll recall, just a few moments ago, we saw Moses climb to the top of Mt. Sinai, where God had revealed Himself in terrifying splendor, and there on the mountaintop, Moses received from God the terms of the covenant that God was willing to make with His nation Israel. However, we know perfectly well that God is a spiritual being. On earth, God is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. He wasn't limited to being on the top of Mt. Sinai any more than He is limited to being in our midst this morning, even though He was there and is here.

Jesus, then, didn't seek God in any physical location. Instead, in His spirit, He went to seek God where God actually lived—in the holy place of heaven itself. What Moses approached on Sinai was just a divine metaphor. What Jesus approached in heaven was the soul-crushing majesty of God Himself. Sinai was an imperfect location for the enactment of an imperfect covenant. The covenant that Christ would make in heaven, however, would endure forever.

Once Jesus appeared in heaven, He **MEDIATED A NEW COVENANT**. Notice how Jesus is described in Hebrews 12:22, 24. As we said earlier, in our dealings with God, we desperately need a go-between. We don't know how to approach God by ourselves, and even if we did know and decided to go to Him on our own, we would quickly be turned into a grease spot. We need help with our sins, but it is those very sins that keep us from getting the help we need.

The only possible solution to this spiritual Catch-22 is Jesus. We need a mediator, and what a mediator we have! Our sins separate us from God, but Jesus never sinned, so He could approach the Almighty on our behalf without fear. It was Jesus who could bring our plight before God. It was Jesus who could say, "These people love You and want to be with You forever, but they need a system set up by which they can find forgiveness for their sins." It was Jesus who could offer a solution to the sin problem. The blood that Jesus shed on the cross didn't only function as the blood that bore witness to the covenant. It functioned as the blood of forgiveness too. Jesus shed that lifeblood, even though He was sinless and didn't deserve to die. That was an injustice. It tipped the scales in one direction. However, it gave God the opportunity to balance the scales by being merciful to us, even though our sins mean that we do deserve to die. As Romans 3 says, the consequence of the death of Christ was that God could remain just, yet still justify us because of our faith in Jesus. Through His mediation, we have a covenant that promises us redemption and eternal life.

As a consequence of this, Jesus also **TERMINATED THE OLD COVENANT**. Once again, this is one of the major themes of the book of Hebrews, but a passage that summarizes this discussion is Hebrews 8:6-7. Even though

the old covenant made on Sinai was the core of the Jewish religion, it had to go, and it had to go for two reasons. First, the old covenant was inherently flawed. The animal sacrifices that it prescribed weren't good enough to purchase true forgiveness of sins. Only the blood of Jesus could do that. Second, as we discussed earlier, this old covenant was an agreement. God promised the Israelites that He would bless them if they obeyed Him. However, that's exactly what the Israelites didn't do. They spent a thousand years trampling all over the terms of the covenant, and they eventually became so wicked and disobedient that God was forced to cast them out of the land entirely. They broke the covenant. It became null and void because of their sin. From that time on, God looked to replace the old covenant with a new one. That replacement occurred with the death of Jesus. As a result, God's people today are under the new covenant, and only under the new covenant. It lays out our spiritual obligations and tells us what we can expect from God in return.

Finally, Jesus **INSTITUTED THE LORD'S SUPPER** to commemorate the founding of this new covenant. Let's learn about this from 1 Corinthians 11:25-26. Today, millions of people the world over are gathered to celebrate the holiday of Easter, because today is the anniversary-ish of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. However, neither the word "Easter" nor instructions for its observance appear in the Bible. Easter is the way that man came up with to honor the death and the resurrection of Christ. It is not the memorial that Christ Himself requested.

Instead, we learn about what Jesus wants from passages like this one. According to the Scripture, the early church remembered the death of Jesus not once a year, but once a week. They didn't honor Him with elaborate processions and pageants, but with a simple meal of unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. Today, in obedience to His word, we are going to do the same. To us, the bread is His body, and the cup is the blood that He shed to consecrate the new covenant. Let's remember that we are a covenant people, bound by blood, as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

### **Our Covenant Today**

As we said just a moment ago, we are a covenant people. Just like the Israelites made an agreement with God in which they promised to obey Him in exchange for His blessing, so too we have promised to obey Him in exchange for His blessing. If we want to receive that blessing, we must understand the nature of our covenant today.

First, we must recognize that as a consequence of the change from the old covenant to the new covenant, **A CHANGE OF LAW** has occurred. Read with me from Hebrews 7:12. When we looked at Hebrews 9, we saw Jesus performing the high-priestly function of bringing blood before God to redeem God's people from their sins. However, there's a catch to that. Under the Law of Moses, priests could only come from the tribe of Levi. Jesus, on the other hand, came from the tribe of Judah, a tribe that was forbidden by the Law of Moses to serve as priests. In order for Jesus to serve as a priest in heaven, the entire system of the Mosaic law had to be overturned. If that didn't happen, then forgiveness of sins for us, and indeed for all of mankind, would be impossible. Moses' law had to go.

As a result of this, we are **NO LONGER UNDER THE LAW**. There are whole books of the Bible devoted to this point, but it is perhaps best summarized in Galatians 3:24-25. Paul uses a simple analogy to explain what the Law of Moses was for. He tells us that its purpose was to teach and protect the people until Christ came and man could be justified by faith in Him. However, now that Christ has come, we are no longer under the guardianship of the Law.

People who don't know much about the Bible think that we are bound to keep the entire Bible, that if we open our Bibles to the book of Leviticus and find some random commandment about mixing two kinds of cloth, that we have to do that. In reality, that is not at all true. Our Bibles are divided into two main parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. "Testament" is just another word for "covenant", so it's equally legitimate to think of these two parts as the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, the same covenants we've been talking about all morning. Everything in the Old Testament is part of the Law of Moses, so if something is in the Old Testament, God does not expect us to follow it today. It is not part of our agreement with Him. The Old Testament still has many uses. It tells us about the history of God's people and reveals much about His nature, but it does not make up any part of the law we must follow today.

Instead, we are only **SUBJECT TO CHRIST**. God the Father Himself instructs us to obey Jesus in Mark 9:7. This event occurs on the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses, the giver of the Old Law, and Elijah, the foremost of God's prophets, have miraculously appeared before Jesus and some of His apostles. The apostle Peter is frightened by the supernatural events and suggests that he needs to build three tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. In response to this suggestion, Moses and Elijah vanish, and the Father proclaims from heaven, "Listen to Jesus."

Today, friends, we must do the same. We don't have to hear Moses and his teachings. We don't have to hear Elijah and his teachings. However, we must hear Christ and His teachings. Some of these teachings came from Jesus Himself; others were revealed by Jesus' apostles and close followers. All of these teachings put together constitute the law of Christ, and this law sets out our responsibilities under the covenant that we have made with God. If we want to inherit eternal life, we must follow the teachings of the New Testament, and only the teachings of the New Testament.

All this seems quite abstract, but it has important implications for our practice today. To illustrate this, let's look at one difference between the way we worship and **OLD-COVENANT WORSHIP**. Read with me from 2 Chronicles 29:25, 28. There are several things we can learn from this text. First of all, it is an undeniable fact that under the old

covenant, God's people used musical instruments in their worship assemblies. Everything that the people of Judah do in this passage is completely correct under their agreement with God. Second of all, we see that they did it because God gave them a clear command to do it through His prophets. They didn't presume to use the instrument in the absence of divine instruction because they thought it would be OK. They did it because God told them specifically, "Use the instrument!" Obviously, when God wants the instrument, He knows how to ask for the instrument.

Finally, this passage teaches us that God regards singing and playing an instrument as two separate activities. The Chronicler doesn't say, "the singers sang" and then expect us to understand that the musicians accompanied the singers as part of the same activity. Instead, he distinguishes between singing and playing. He says, "the singers sang, and the trumpeters trumpeted". Scripturally, singing is different from playing an instrument. Both were part of the Old Law.

The commands we have for **NEW-COVENANT WORSHIP** are quite different. We see a representative of these commands in Colossians 3:16. Here, as elsewhere throughout the New Testament, we are commanded to sing, and only to sing. Nowhere in the New Testament is there even a hint that God commands or even permits Christians to use instruments of music in their worship. Nowhere is there a sign that the early church did use the instrument. This silence concerning the instrument is not an oversight. As we've already seen, God is perfectly capable of commanding His people to use the instrument when He wants it to happen. Nor can we assume that instrumental accompaniment is somehow lumped in with singing. Instead, we've seen that God considers instrumental music a separate activity.

Finally, we cannot presume to use the instrument in our worship because King Hezekiah, 700 years before the birth of Christ, did. Hezekiah lived and died under the old covenant. He obeyed the Law of Moses. We live and die under the new covenant. We must obey the law of Christ. Of course, most churches today refuse to do this. They use the instrument in their assemblies, even though God has not authorized them to do so. Many of them will cite passages from the Old Testament to justify themselves. However, before we follow their example, we must ask who we want to be spiritually. Do we want to disobey God, and hear Moses, or do we want to obey Him, and hear only Christ?