



Covenants Part 1

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COVENANTS PART 1

LESSON ONE

THE NATURE OF COVENANT

The motive for covenant - relationship

The origin and heart of all covenants is that they have to do with God's relationship with mankind. The uniqueness of man lies in the fact that he alone was created with the capacity for relationship with his Creator, so that man is defined in the Bible, not as the end product of an evolutionary process, but in terms of his relationship with God. It says, "***God created man in his own image***". ***Genesis 1:27.***

We begin therefore with this fundamental key to understanding all the biblical covenants.

THE REASON FOR COVENANT SPRINGS FROM THE DESIRE OF GOD TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP OF PERSONAL INTIMACY WITH MAN.

This central emphasis on relationships as the intention behind covenant is clearly expressed in the tripartite covenant formula that recurs throughout Scripture.

"I will be your God". Genesis 17: 7-8

"You shall be my people" Exodus 6:7

"I will dwell in the midst of you" Exodus 29: 45-46

Where this formula is found either in part or in full, the context is always the covenant. For example:

"I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people". Leviticus 26:12

See also Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Deuteronomy 29: 12-15; Jeremiah 31:33. 32:38; Ezekiel 37:27; Zechariah 8:8; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3-7.

The covenant relationship

Here is another fundamental principle of covenant.

THE RELATIONSHIP IN COVENANT IS A BONDED ONE, THEREFORE THE OBLIGATION OF COVENANT IS COMMITMENT OR PERSONAL LOYALTY.

The Hebrew word for covenant is "b'riyth", meaning to bind, therefore a covenant is not merely a personal relationship, or even one of intimacy, but a relationship based on a solemn promise and confirmed with an oath. The bond that a covenant creates between the parties makes them one. Thus, we read that

the soul of Jonathan was “knit” to the soul of David 1 Samuel 18: 1-3 RSV and a man “*cleaves to his wife*” so that they become one flesh Genesis 2:24. RSV. The bond that covenant creates between the parties is therefore:

- 1.Pre-eminent, that is, its obligations supersede and takes priority over all other claims.
- 2.Permanent, that is, it is not time-based or for a limited period. All covenants are therefore perpetual or everlasting.
- 3.Inviolable. Because of the sacred nature of the covenant bond, to break it is, in God’s eyes, the most serious kind of wrongdoing imaginable.

God’s covenants with man

When we consider the covenants that God has made with man during human history, we will find from first to last that relationship lies at their heart, and that, in fact, every permanent relationship between God and man is based on covenant.

1. The Covenant in Eden

Although the term covenant is not used in the first chapters of Genesis, it is clear that the relationship between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was covenantal. God was their God they were his people and God walked with them in the Garden.

It was also a relationship of great personal intimacy. God puts Adam in the garden and instructs him to take care of it. God gives him commands to obey and brings the beasts and the birds for him to classify. Moreover, God is close enough to Adam to see his inner aloneness and makes woman to be his helper. What is more, God personally introduces her to Adam (Genesis 2: 15-22). When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke covenant.

“Like Adam, they have broken the covenant - they were unfaithful to me there.” Hosea 6:7.

Rejecting the relationship of creatures living obediently in personal intimacy with the Creator and instead seeking independence and autonomy, Adam and Eve suffered the inescapable consequences, expulsion from the Garden, the pain of mortality and a new and terrible spiritual aloneness, because no initiative on their part could ever find the way back to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).

But here begins the redemptive search on God’s part to restore the broken relationship with man. This restoration is also expressed in the form of covenants.

2.The Covenant with Noah

The first time the word “covenant” appears in Scripture is in God’s promise to Noah, ***“I will establish my covenant with you”*** Genesis 6:18; Genesis 9: 8-16. But already the emphasis is on relationships, for concerning Noah we read that he ***“found favour in the eyes of the Lord”*** and ***“was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.”*** Genesis 6: 8-9. To the Hebrews, righteousness is a relationship term. It means maintaining the covenant.

3. The Covenant with Abraham

One of the pivotal passages in the Old Testament is God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15: 8-21; 17: 1-22). Concerning Abraham's covenantal relationship with God, we have God's own endorsement: ***"But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend". Isaiah 41:8. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend". James 2:23.***

4. The Covenant with Israel

This covenant was mediated through Moses with whom God spoke ***"face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" Exodus 33:11*** and was made with Israel because God ***"loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them". Deuteronomy 4:37.*** Henceforth, just as man at creation is defined in terms of his relationship with God, so now Israel as a nation is defined in terms of its covenant relationship with God. ***"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession". Deuteronomy 7:6.***

5. The Covenant with David

The Covenant made with David ranks in importance with the Abrahamic covenant and is exceeded in significance only by the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah. Again, the key is intimacy with God, for God describes David as ***"a man after his own heart" 1 Samuel 13:4,*** and says ***"He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Saviour.' I will maintain my kindness to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail." Psalm 89:26,28.6.***

6. The New Covenant

Finally, in the new covenant, foretold by the prophets and accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, man's lost relationship with God is at last restored. Now we, Jew and Gentile alike, are the Israel of God, his covenant people and our corporate identity, like that of Israel, is established by the covenant. ***"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." 1 Peter 2:9.***

But individually we also, like Abraham, Moses and David, become God's intimate friends: ***"You are my friends, if you do what I command, I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." John 15: 14-15***

This is the final covenant between God and man. There will never be another, nor will another ever be needed, because this one leads on to the final perfected restoration of relationships in the New Jerusalem. ***"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with man, and he will be with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'" Revelation 21:3***

How covenant arises

We come now to some other important characteristics of the way in which the covenants between God and man come into being. These affect the entire nature of the covenant relationship.

A COVENANT IS NOT AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN PARTIES OF EQUAL STANDING AND POWER, BUT BETWEEN UNEQUALS, THE INITIATIVE BEING TAKEN BY THE STRONGER PARTY, WHO VOLUNTARILY BINDS HIMSELF TO TAKE ON AN OBLIGATION TO THE WEAKER PARTY.

In the covenant between God and man, the initiative is always taken solely by God. You never find man proposing a covenant with God, it is always God who offers his covenant to man. ***“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” Genesis 17:7. “The time is coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” Jeremiah 31:31.***

BECAUSE THE COVENANT IS GOD’S INITIATIVE AND GOD’S GIFT TO MAN, IT IS FOUNDED ON GRACE, IT IS MAINTAINED BY GRACE AND IT OPERATES SOLELY ON THE BASIS OF GRACE.

That means that the covenant relationship - (a) Is completely undeserved and unmerited, that is, there is no virtue or worthiness on our part that gives us any claim to God’s attention. (b) Is not only unmerited, it is actually an expression of generous and forgiving love on the part of God whom we have offended and sinned against. (c) Does not spring out of any need on God’s part to have a relationship with man or to have man’s fellowship. It is the free and sovereign expression of the graciousness of his character.

IN A COVENANT, IT IS ALSO THE STRONGER PARTY WHO SETS OUT THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THE COVENANT OBLIGATIONS WILL BE FULFILLED. IN THE COVENANTS BETWEEN GOD AND MAN, GOD ALONE SETS OUT THE TERMS.

Thus, while a covenant is an agreement between the parties, it is an agreement only in the sense that the recipient, the weaker party, must agree to the terms given in order to participate in the covenant.

Thus, in the covenant between God and man, it is always God who makes the covenant, never man, and it is always God who sets the terms, never man. God offers his covenant to us and we can accept or reject it, but the terms are never open for debate, they are not subject to negotiation. ***“Then he (Moses) took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’” Exodus 24:7.***

One of the reasons why so many of us do not experience the blessings of the covenant is that we have considered the terms too demanding. Therefore, we have either tried to side-step them, only partially obeyed them, or have tried offering God some alternatives that are more acceptable to us.

BECAUSE THE COVENANT DEALS WITH GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MAN, IT IS ALL EMBRACING, NO PART OF MAN'S LIFE IS OUTSIDE OF THE COVENANT.

The covenant begins with the personal relationship of God with the totality of man's life in Eden - physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, vocational and relational. The ultimate and eternal goal of covenant is God dwelling with men within the renewed creation. ***“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.” Revelation 21:3.***

Thus, the relationship of covenant always extends to every domain of human life and brings every sphere of human activity within its scope, temporal and eternal, spiritual and secular, individual and societal, private and public, personal and institutional.

FINALLY, COVENANT HAS TO PROVIDE, NOT ONLY THE TERMS OF THE RELATIONSHIP, BUT ALSO THE DYNAMIC TO ENABLE MAN TO LIVE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH A HOLY GOD.

For the covenant relationship to be completely restored, God has to find: (1) A final resolution of the sin problem that would fully satisfy both his holiness and his mercy, and (2) A final resolution to the obedience problem, so that man would be able to live in harmony with the covenant terms, that is, the law of God.

As we will see, this is the supreme provision of the New Covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.

LESSON TWO

THE NATURE OF THE COVENANT BOND

The covenant is the most serious and solemn of all relationships, but we now have to understand why that is so and why it is that God takes it so seriously.

There are three major steps involved in making a covenant:

- 1) A promise
- 2) An oath
- 3) A sacrifice

Promise - the commitment of covenant

People today make promises very lightly and break them with so little compunction that we have virtually ceased to consider a promise to be of any consequence. This is one of the main reasons why we have difficulty trusting God's promises. It's hard for us to believe that God is that meticulous about keeping his promises.

A promise is generally an undertaking to do or to give something in the future, or an undertaking to refrain from doing or giving something in the future. But when I make a promise, I am not merely expressing a proposal or an intention:

- 1) I am making a serious and earnest commitment as to how I am going to act in the future.
- 2) I intend that commitment to be taken and relied on as an assurance that I will, in fact, act in a way I have declared.
- 3) I am also taking on myself the duty or obligation to fulfil my pledged word when the time comes no matter how costly or inconvenient it may be to do so. In other words. I acknowledge that I have limited my freedom of action in that particular situation, because I consider myself duty bound to act or do exactly as I have said I would.

God takes his promises very seriously, that is to say, when he makes a promise, he has committed himself to that course of action and we are meant to take his promise as a pledge or guarantee that he will do exactly what he has said. Moreover, when God makes a promise, he limits his sovereignty or freedom of action because he has thereby bound himself in advance as to what he will do in certain situations, and he cannot do otherwise.

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.” Deuteronomy 7:9.

“I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered.” Psalm 89: 33-34

Oath - the confirmation of covenant

When a promise is confirmed by an oath it is given even greater seriousness or solemnity because the person making the oath is calling God to bear witness to his words and is holding himself answerable to God for the truth of his statement or for the binding character of his promise. He is asking God to hold him accountable if he breaks his word.

What is more, the person is acknowledging that his honour and credibility are at stake, that is, his reputation or good name for worthy and principled behaviour is made dependent on him keeping his sworn word.

An oath was considered so serious that if it was taken, it put the person's promise beyond question and his word beyond the possibility of doubt. Even today if a person gives false evidence under oath before a court, he is guilty of the serious crime of perjury.

“Men swear by something greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to the argument.” Hebrews 6:16

God's covenants are always based on his promises confirmed by an oath.

“But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Genesis 50:24.

“And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever.” Because of this oath Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.” Hebrews 7:20-22.

God's oath, however, is not an appeal to a higher authority than himself, it could only be an appeal to his own holy character.

“When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” Hebrews 6: 13-14.

Sacrifice - the sealing of the covenant

The third act in establishing covenant is probably the most solemn and striking of all. The only way covenant is entered into is by sacrifice, and sacrifice means the shedding of blood.

“When Moses proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.

There are several important issues involved in the sacrifice.

Atonement

Firstly, in the covenant between God and man, the restoration of a relationship is possible only if the question of sin is satisfactorily dealt with. Thus, covenant and forgiveness go hand in hand.

For example, the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 begins with the declaration. ***“The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.”*** and ends with the assurance, ***“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*** The new covenant passage in Ezekiel 36:25-29 begins with the promise, ***“I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols”*** and ends with the covenant formula, ***“You will be my people, and I will be your God.”***

But forgiveness is possible only through atonement, and atonement is possible only through sacrifice, and sacrifice means the shedding of blood, ***“for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”***. ***Hebrews 9:22***

Atonement is the covering of sin by something that robs it of its power to separate man and God, and that something is the blood of Christ.

Separation

Secondly, when people entered a covenant, the sacrificial ritual was known as “cutting” the covenant. The sacrifice was cut in two pieces and the parties to the covenant walked between its pieces. In God’s covenant with Abram we read:

“So the Lord said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. ’Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.... When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire-pot with a blazing torch (they represented God) appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram” ***Genesis 15: 9-10, 17-18.***

Here, not only Abram, but God himself, passed between the pieces and made the covenant.

What is symbolised is that the parties to the covenant acknowledge their death. They have entered covenant by death and the sacrifice represents their death. That is why the Bible makes no distinction between covenant and testimony or will.

“For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead; otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.” ***Hebrews 9: 16-17 AV.***

THAT DEATH MEANS FINAL AND IRREVOCABLE SEPARATION FROM THEIR PREVIOUS LIFE. THEY HAVE GIVEN UP THEIR RIGHT TO LIVE ANY LONGER FOR THEMSELVES. THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THEY HAVE DIED TO THOSE RIGHTS AND HENCEFORTH THEY LIVE FOR, AND IF NEED BE WILL DIE FOR THE OTHER PARTY TO THE COVENANT WHATEVER THE COVENANT PARTNER NEEDS, THEY WILL SUPPLY. WHATEVER THE COVENANT PARTNER ASKS FOR, THEY WILL FREELY GIVE.

In Genesis 18 Abraham asked God to spare Sodom if there were 50 righteous people in the city, and because of the covenant God said “Yes”. Abraham said, “for 45?” “for 40?” “for 30,20,10?” and God said “yes” every time. In the end it was Abraham who stopped asking God. God never said “No” or refused his requests.

In Genesis 22 it is God who asks something of Abraham. He asked for Isaac to be offered up as a burnt offering. Abraham never hesitated, because he too knew covenant rights and covenant obligations. Hebrews 11: 17-19 tell us how Abraham resolved the issue. He believed that he would have to sacrifice Isaac and cremate his body, but because God would never break his promise, he would have to raise him back to life from the ashes.

Curse on covenant breaking

Finally, the covenant has both blessings and curses. The sacrifice has the awesome significance that symbolically the parties call down upon themselves the curse of dismemberment if they break the covenant. When God cut the covenant with Abraham and passed between the pieces of the sacrifice, he said in effect, “May I cease to be God if I ever break my covenant with Abraham.”

In Jeremiah 34, we see the curse on covenant breaking come into operation, when God says:

“The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me. I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between the pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives.” Jeremiah 34: 18-19.

LESSON THREE

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

We come now to examine the content of the covenants between God and man. If covenant is a bonded relationship between God and man, we have still to ask.

What is the nature and scope of that relationship?

What has God bound himself by promise and oath to do or to give?

What is man bound to do so as to keep the covenant and receive its benefits?

To answer these questions, we will examine the four important covenants of Scripture.

1. The covenant with Abraham
2. The covenant with Israel (the Mosaic covenant)
3. The covenant with David
4. The New Covenant of Jesus Christ

The Covenant and Faith

We have seen that covenant is always God's gracious initiative towards man, and the Abrahamic covenant is no exception. ***"God in his grace gave to Abraham through a promise" Galatians 3:18.*** But because the covenant is of grace, the response of man has, of necessity, to be faith, and it is of critical importance to understand why this is so.

1. Grace and faith always go together

Paul deals with this topic in the Epistle to the Romans, he bases his argument on the Abrahamic covenant.

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the Father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a Father of many nations.'" Romans 4:16

Grace, in other words, can never be earned, it can only be received by faith, that is by trusting it as a free gift.

"What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Romans 4: 3-5.

2. Faith in this context is, however, much more than mere intellectual assent to an idea or a concept

Faith has its source and its object in the character of the personal God who has bound himself by covenant. For Abraham it meant that he had to renounce all his human efforts to secure the promise and to trust solely in the God of the covenant to work in the present and the future to accomplish what he said he would do.

3. What was true of Abraham was also true for all men and women of the Old Covenant

Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David and countless others as Hebrews 11 makes quite clear, *“All these people were still living by faith when they died.”*
Hebrews 11:13

FAITH IS THEREFORE ALSO THE KEY TO THE NEW COVENANT

“So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”
Galatians 3:9

The promise

The covenants of Scripture have an essential unity, in that they express a progressive and expanding revelation of God’s plan of blessing for the human race. This plan of God is known in Scripture as “The Promise.” Peter refers to it on the day of Pentecost when he said:

“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:39.

THE PROMISE IS THE PLAN OF GOD IN HUMAN HISTORY TO BRING A UNIVERSAL BLESSING TO THE WHOLE WORLD THROUGH THE AGENCY OF A DIVINELY CHOSEN HUMAN OFFERING.

1. Introduction to the Promise

Immediately after the fall, man’s sin is met, not only with necessary judgement, but with God’s word of grace, the promise of the woman’s seed, or offspring, and from that seed a male individual who would crush the serpent’s head.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring (seed) and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Genesis 3:15

After the flood, there is a second grace word of God, the blessing of Shem, *“May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem.”* Genesis 9:27 NASB. In other words, the promise is to be realised through the Semetic people.

2. The call of Abraham

But after Babel there is something new, a succession of individuals, beginning with Abraham, called by God as his appointed means of fulfilling the word of blessing to mankind.

Even before the covenant is entered into, the language of blessing is prominent in Abraham's call.

“I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Genesis 12: 2-3 NASB.

The provisions of the covenant with Abraham

The covenant with Abraham was God's solemn promise to him (Romans 4:13), confirmed by an oath (Genesis 50:24) and entered into through sacrifice (Genesis 15: 8-21). Its content was very specific.

“Abraham fell face down, and God said to him, ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the Father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; I will be their God.’” Genesis 17: 3-8.

The content of the promise to Abraham was basically threefold, a seed, a land and a universal blessing.

1. The seed

The ancient promise to Eve is revived. Childless Abraham is promised offspring, or a seed who will inherit the land of Canaan. They would be as numerous as the stars, would possess the cities of their enemies, and would be the means through whom all the nations on earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:7; 13: 15-16; 15:5, 18-20; 17: 7-9, 19; 21:12; 22:17-18).

Throughout Scripture, the seed has both a collective and an individual reference. Sometimes, it refers to one person; at other times, to the many descendants of a family.

a. In its collective sense

The promised seed is inseparably linked to the Israelite race and the land promise, but it is not limited to that fulfilment, as Paul points out.

“Understand, then, that those who believe are children of AbrahamIf you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Galatians 3: 7, 29.

b. In an individual sense

It has reference to successive sons of the patriarchs. In each case, the firstborn of the flesh is set aside in favour of the firstborn of promise. Ishmael is set aside in favour of Isaac (Genesis 17: 19-21; Galatians 4: 22-31). Esau is set aside in favour of Jacob (Genesis 28: 12-14) and Simeon is set aside in favour of Judah (Genesis 49:10).

c. Its ultimate fulfilment

It is in the person of Jesus Christ, the promised seed who would crush the serpent’s head, and the seed of Abraham through whom all families on earth have been blessed.

“Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ” Galatians 3:16 NASB

2. A land

In the Abrahamic covenant, the promise of the seed is inseparable from the promise of the land. We need to understand why this is so.

a. From the beginning man has been given a special relationship with the earth

Adam is placed in the Garden to work it and to take care of it. When man fell, the whole creation was destroyed by his sin; the earth is cursed because of him (Genesis 3:17).

b. God’s grace is extended not only towards man but towards creation

The restoration of covenant relationship, or human redemption, can therefore be understood only as an integral part of the redemption of all creation. Thus, not only are the covenant people chosen, the land is chosen as well:

*“It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.”
Deuteronomy 11:12*

The fulfilment of the land promise began with the partial occupation and conquest of Canaan under Joshua. A greater and more complete specific, geographical and national fulfilment still lies in the future.

At the same time, just as the seed of Abraham is ultimately extended to include those who believe in Christ, so to the land promise also expands.

“Abraham and his descendants received the promise that he would be heir of the world.” Romans 4:13

The land of Canaan, we discover, turns out to be but a staging post on the way to world dominion, that is, the Kingdom of God. But just as world dominion for the seed of Abraham will be literally fulfilled, so must the national domain of Israel be literally fulfilled.

3. The universal blessing

The blessings, spiritual and material, that God bestowed on Abraham were not only because he was “the friend of God”. They were in order that he might be a blessing, and so that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12: 2-3) and through his offspring (Genesis 22:18).

a. The emphasis in the life of Isaac, the child of promise is on the seed, and Abraham’s fleshly attempts to fulfil the promise.

b. The emphasis in the life of Jacob is on the land, and on his fleshly attempts to obtain it by cheating Esau of his rights as the firstborn.

c. The emphasis in the life of Joseph, as the Saviour of Egypt, is on the beginning of the blessing to the nations. The ultimate fulfilment of the universal blessing, however, is the justification of the Gentiles by faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in Advance of Abraham:

“All nations will be blessed through you! So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” Galatians 3: 8-9, 14.

Nature of the Abrahamic covenant

Finally note the following important points about the Abrahamic covenant

1. It is an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7,13,19), therefore it has remained in force ever since it was made with Abraham. Moses pleaded the Abrahamic covenant when God threatened to destroy Israel because of their sin (Exodus 32:3). Because of the covenant with Abraham, God repeatedly Intervened in Israel's crises (Exodus 2:24; 2 Kings 13:23; Psalm 105: 8-11). Zechariah's prophecy at the birth of John the Baptist declared that God had Remembered his covenant with Abraham (Luke 1: 72-73), and Paul says in Galatians 3:14 that the work of redemption was in order to bring the Gentiles into its blessing.

2. It is a three-party covenant, that is, it was made by God with Abraham and with Abraham's descendants. In a three-party covenant, even if one party breaks the covenant, the other two parties remain bound. Thus, the unbelieving seed of Abraham cannot break God's covenant with Abraham; they themselves will lose the covenant promises, but the promises still stand for future generations to enter into if they meet the covenant requirements of faith and obedience (Hebrews 3: 16 - 4:3)

3. It is all embracing. God became their God therefore the covenant embraced the entirety of the lives of the patriarchs and the totality of their relationship with God. Thus, it includes:

a. Spiritual blessings. God would be the God of Abraham and his descendants after him. He would make Abraham's name great and would bless those who blessed him and curse whoever cursed him (Genesis 12:3, 17:7).

b. Material blessings, including great wealth and the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession (Genesis 13:2; 15:18).

c. A new status or standing, and therefore new, God given names. Abram becomes Abraham. Isaac is named by God and Jacob becomes Israel (Genesis 17:5, 19; 32:28). Henceforth, God calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chronicles 29:18).

LESSON FOUR

THE MOSAIC COVENANT

In the four centuries between Joseph and Moses, there had already been a partial fulfilment of the promise to Abraham of numerous offspring. The family had become a nation of over 2 million, but they had also become a slave people. In this situation, the covenant with Abraham is declared to be the grounds for God's intervention on their behalf.

“Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.” Exodus 6:5

God's remembering his covenant does not have to do with mere recall, it is God allowing his covenant commitment to affect his actions.

With this there is also God's revelation of his name Yahweh. The Hebrew word 'Yahweh' transliterated Jehovah is usually rendered in the Old Testament by LORD written in small capitals.

Yahweh is a salvation name, the most frequently used Name of God in the Old Testament. The name itself had been known to the patriarchs, but God would now reveal the significance of that name by his acts of salvation on behalf of his people.

The name Jehovah is used in Scripture to denote a covenant keeping God.

The Covenant at Sinai

After Israel's experience of deliverance from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, they journeyed to Mount Sinai where Moses received the law and the pattern for the Tabernacle. This was God giving the covenant to Israel.

“Then the Lord (LORD) said to Moses, ‘Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and Israel.’ Moses was there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant - the Ten Commandments.” Exodus 34: 27-28

THE MOSAIC COVENANT, THAT IS, THE COVENANT WITH ISRAEL IS AN EXPANSION AND APPLICATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT - THE PROMISE MADE TO A CHOSEN FAMILY IS NOW EXTENDED TO A CHOSEN NATION.

Let us see what was involved in this expansion of the promise.

1. The Seed

a. Israel is God's son, his firstborn (Exodus 4: 22-23) 'Son' and 'Firstborn' are henceforth collective terms for Israel (Jeremiah 31:9), but also terms referring to the specific individual, the Messiah, who would ultimately come to fulfil the terms of the Promise.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son”.
Hosea 11:1

b. Israel is the people of God (Exodus 5:1, 7:14)

- i) They are a nation, that is, they are now numerous enough and have enough inner unity to become an ethnic social group with its own distinctive culture, norms and outlook, yet bound to God in a special way by his sovereign choice.
- ii) They are God's inheritance and his treasured possession, literally “God's special moveable treasure”. (Deuteronomy 9:29, Psalm 33:12).
- iii) They are a community (Exodus 12:3). The root meaning of the word has to do with testimony. Israel in the wilderness as she celebrated the Passover was a testing to the saving power of God.

2. The Land

The theme of the land is a major one in Israel's history. For example, salvation is described as bringing Israel out of the land of Egypt and into the land of promise (Exodus 3:8). Note the following important points.

a. The land is a gift and comes from God's love for his people (Exodus 6:8; Deuteronomy 1:7; 6:10). But although the land is given, Israel still had to possess it. They could not take it by their own power, as they found to their cost in Kadesh (Numbers 14: 39-45)

b. The land always belongs to God therefore, it could not be alienated from the tribe (Numbers 36:9); and even if it is sold, it must in the year of Jubilee be returned to the original owner (Leviticus 25: 23-28).

c. The land was a symbol of blessing, it was a **“good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8)**. Therefore, land is also associated with “rest” (Deuteronomy 12: 9-10), that is a particular quality of life that consisted of:

- i. Victory over all their enemies
- ii. The cessation of internal strife
- iii. The fulfilment of all God's promises (Joshua 21: 43-45)

3. The Universal Blessing

The role that God had in store for Israel was the most exalted imaginable.

a) God had chosen to live amongst them. As well as the general or structural presence of God in all creation (Psalm 139: 7-12; Jeremiah 23: 23-24), Israel experienced those greater intensifications of God's presence expressing his desire for intimacy with his people, for example:

i) God's accompanying presence in the wilderness, manifested in the cloud and the fire (Exodus 13: 20-22; 16:10; 24: 15-18), the Presence, the glory and the name (Exodus 33:9, 19-22).

ii) God's tabernacle presence. The central aspect of the Tabernacle is God's presence in the Ark of the Testimony and the Mercy Seat (Exodus 25: 10-22).

iii) God's theophanic presence: highly intense, sharply focused moments of divine appearance, commonly face to face encounters at watershed times in the lives of individuals or communities (Exodus 33:11; 34: 29-35; Joshua 5: 13-15)

b) Israel to be a kingdom of priests, that is, relating to God as her King (Deuteronomy 33:5) and to the nations as royal priests. In other words, they were to be mediators of God's grace to the ends of the earth.

As the record shows, Israel declined this privilege (Exodus 19: 16-25; 20: 18-21). The tribe of Levi received the priesthood and this purpose of God is delayed until the New Covenant when the church steps into the priestly role (1 Peter 2:9).

The Covenant and Obedience

We have already seen that because covenant is always grace on God's part, the necessary response on man's part is always faith. Here is another corollary, a proposition that follows directly from the proof of another preposition:

BECAUSE THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT ARE ALWAYS SET BY GOD, THE NECESSARY RESPONSE ON MAN'S PART IS ALWAYS OBEDIENCE.

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possessions. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests a holy nation.” Exodus 19: 5-6.

Obedience is then the same as “keeping the covenant” Deuteronomy 29:9; Leviticus 26:15, 44; 1 Kings 11:11; Psalm 78:10; 132:12; Isaiah 56:4; Jeremiah 11:6) and disobedience is “violating the covenant” (2 Kings 18:12; Jeremiah 34: 17-18; Deuteronomy 17: 2-3).

Therefore, just as we may say that from man's side there is no participation in covenant without faith, we may also say there is equally no participation in covenant without obedience.

Nevertheless, although keeping the covenant involves obedience to its terms and conditions, it is important to understand that the terms and conditions do not make the covenant. In this a covenant differs radically from a contract.

A contract is formed by the terms and conditions to which the parties have agreed. Agreement to the terms creates the contract.

A covenant is formed by the bond of personal loyalty into which the parties enter. The terms and conditions arise out of that bond; they do not create the bond, but they explain what that particular bonded relationship entails for both parties.

The Greek word for covenant or testament is '*diatheke*', which means "to set something out in order".

The covenant has this sense of orderliness and rightness. It sets forth terms and conditions, because God does not act out of caprice (sudden or unpredictable change of attitude) or whim or fancy.

For Israel the law is the 'book of the covenant' (Exodus 24:7). It did not create the covenant relationship between God and Israel, but it articulated in detail how this was to be understood and what was involved in maintaining fellowship with God. In other words, Israel was in covenant with God by grace, but the law explained what it then meant for Israel that God was their God and they were his people.

In the same way, for us, the entire New Testament is the book of the New Covenant of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In it, God makes his covenant will and purposes known to us so that we are not left guessing as to what they might be, or what is required of us to live in covenant relationship with him. We will come back to this in more detail when we deal with the New Covenant.

The Law and Holiness to the Lord

One of the startling features of the covenant with Israel is its emphasis on holiness. To Israel first, God revealed his holiness, and over 40% of the appearances of the word holy in the Old Testament are found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Because Israel belongs to God, holiness is not an optional extra, but an essential feature of her life.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'". Leviticus 19: 1-2

The law of God is given to show Israel what it means to be holy, because Israel is not serving an arbitrary deity (founded on or subject to personal whims, prejudices etc), but One who makes his will known and is consistent in all dealings.

Israel are given:

- a) The moral law, in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17; Deuteronomy 5: 6-21) summarising God's moral boundary rules for human life.
- b) The civil law, the application of the moral law to public life.
- c) The ceremonial law, the sacrificial system to deal with sin and failure.

The Law Leading to Christ

The law had, however, another essential function that only it could fulfil, as Paul explains.

“Therefore, the law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith”. Galatians 3:24

The way in which the law fulfilled this function can be summarised briefly as follows:

- 1) By revealing the holiness of God and the requirements of that holiness, it revealed to man his sin (Romans 7: 7-13).
- 2) By revealing the root of sin as being within man, that is, his set of inner values known as the flesh, it demonstrated his total incapacity to live by external law, even when that law is written by the finger of God. (Romans 7: 14-25; 8:7; Galatians 5: 19-21).
- 3) It shot man into the only possible means of justification that is by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3: 23-24).

We will deal with the implications of this more fully when we come to the New Covenant.
