

Covenants in the Old and New Testaments



Covenant with Noah after the Flood:

Lest the gathering clouds and falling rain should fill men with constant terror, from fear of another flood, the Lord encouraged the family of Noah by a promise: “I will establish My covenant with you; . . . neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. . . . I do set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud. . . . And I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature.”

How great the condescension of God and His compassion for His erring creatures in thus placing the beautiful rainbow in the clouds as a token of His covenant with men! The Lord declares that when He looks upon the bow, He will remember His covenant. This does not imply that He would ever forget; but He speaks to us in our own language, that we may better understand Him. It was God’s purpose that as the children of after generations should ask the meaning of the glorious arch which spans the heavens, their parents should repeat the story of the Flood, and tell them that the Most High had bended the bow and placed it in the clouds as an assurance that the waters should never again overflow the earth. Thus from generation to generation it would testify of divine love to man and would strengthen his confidence in God.¹²

Covenant with Abraham:

When Abraham had been nearly twenty-five years in Canaan, the Lord appeared unto him, and said, “I am the Almighty God; walk before Me, and be thou perfect.” In awe, the patriarch fell upon his face, and the message continued: “Behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.” In token of the fulfillment of this covenant, his name, heretofore called Abram, was changed to Abraham, which signifies, “father of a great multitude.” Sarai’s name became Sarah—“princess;” for, said the divine Voice, “she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.”

At this time the rite of circumcision was given to Abraham as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.” Romans 4:11. It was to be observed by the patriarch and his descendants as a token that they were devoted to the service of God and thus separated from idolaters, and that God accepted them as His peculiar treasure. By this rite they were pledged to fulfill, on their part, the conditions of the covenant made with Abraham. They were not to contract marriages with the heathen; for by so doing they would lose their reverence for God and His holy law; they would be tempted to engage in the sinful practices of other nations, and would be seduced into idolatry.¹³

Covenant at Sinai:

Soon after the encampment at Sinai, Moses was called up into the mountain to meet with God. Alone he climbed the steep and rugged path, and drew near to the cloud that marked the place of Jehovah's presence. Israel was now to be taken into a close and peculiar relation to the Most High—to be incorporated as a church and a nation under the government of God. The message to Moses for the people was:

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine: and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”

Moses returned to the camp, and having summoned the elders of Israel, he repeated to them the divine message. Their answer was, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.” Thus they entered into a solemn covenant with God, pledging themselves to accept Him as their ruler, by which they became, in a special sense, the subjects of His authority.

On the morning of the third day, as the eyes of all the people were turned toward the mount, its summit was covered with a thick cloud, which grew more black and dense, sweeping downward until the entire mountain was wrapped in darkness and awful mystery. Then a sound as of a trumpet was heard, summoning the people to meet with God; and Moses led them forth to the base of the mountain. From the thick darkness flashed vivid lightnings, while peals of thunder echoed and re-echoed among the surrounding heights. “And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.” “The glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount” in the sight of the assembled multitude. And “the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder.” So terrible were the tokens of Jehovah's presence that the hosts of Israel shook with fear, and fell upon their faces before the Lord. Even Moses exclaimed, “I exceedingly fear and quake.” Hebrews 12:21.

And now the thunders ceased; the trumpet was no longer heard; the earth was still. There was a period of solemn silence, and then the voice of God was heard. Speaking out of the thick darkness that enshrouded Him, as He stood upon the mount, surrounded by a retinue of angels, the Lord made known His law. Moses, describing the scene, says: “The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints: from His right hand went a fiery law for them. Yea, He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.” Deuteronomy 33:2, 3.

Jehovah revealed Himself, not alone in the awful majesty of the judge and lawgiver, but as the compassionate guardian of His people: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” He whom they had already known as their Guide and Deliverer, who had brought them forth from Egypt, making a way for them through the sea, and overthrowing Pharaoh and his hosts, who had thus shown Himself to be above all the gods of Egypt—He it was who now spoke His law.

The law was not spoken at this time exclusively for the benefit of the Hebrews. God honored them by making them the guardians and keepers of His law, but it was to be held as a sacred trust for the whole world. The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind, and they were given for the instruction and government of all. Ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, cover the duty of man to God and to his fellow man; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.” Luke 10:27. See also Deuteronomy 6:4, 5; Leviticus 19:18. In the Ten Commandments these principles are carried out in detail, and made applicable to the condition and circumstances of man.¹⁴

Covenant with Phinehas:

At Balaam's suggestion, a grand festival in honor of their gods was appointed by the king of Moab, and it was secretly arranged that Balaam should induce the Israelites to attend. He was regarded by them as a prophet of God, and hence had little difficulty in accomplishing his purpose. Great numbers of the people joined him in witnessing the festivities. They ventured upon the forbidden ground, and were entangled in the snare of Satan. Beguiled with music and dancing, and allured by the beauty of heathen vestals, they cast off their fealty to Jehovah. As they united in mirth and feasting, indulgence in wine beclouded their senses and broke down the

barriers of self-control. Passion had full sway; and having defiled their consciences by lewdness, they were persuaded to bow down to idols. They offered sacrifice upon heathen altars and participated in the most degrading rites.

It was not long before the poison had spread, like a deadly infection, through the camp of Israel. Those who would have conquered their enemies in battle were overcome by the wiles of heathen women. The people seemed to be infatuated. The rulers and the leading men were among the first to transgress, and so many of the people were guilty that the apostasy became national. "Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor." When Moses was aroused to perceive the evil, the plots of their enemies had been so successful that not only were the Israelites participating in the licentious worship at Mount Peor, but the heathen rites were coming to be observed in the camp of Israel. The aged leader was filled with indignation, and the wrath of God was kindled.

Their iniquitous practices did that for Israel which all the enchantments of Balaam could not do—they separated them from God. By swift-coming judgments the people were awakened to the enormity of their sin. A terrible pestilence broke out in the camp, to which tens of thousands speedily fell a prey. God commanded that the leaders in this apostasy be put to death by the magistrates. This order was promptly obeyed. The offenders were slain, then their bodies were hung up in sight of all Israel that the congregation, seeing the leaders so severely dealt with, might have a deep sense of God's abhorrence of their sin and the terror of His wrath against them.

All felt that the punishment was just, and the people hastened to the tabernacle, and with tears and deep humiliation confessed their sin. While they were thus weeping before God, at the door of the tabernacle, while the plague was still doing its work of death, and the magistrates were executing their terrible commission, Zimri, one of the nobles of Israel, came boldly into the camp, accompanied by a Midianitish harlot, a princess "of a chief house in Midian," whom he escorted to his tent. Never was vice bolder or more stubborn. Inflamed with wine, Zimri declared his "sin as Sodom," and gloried in his shame. The priests and leaders had prostrated themselves in grief and humiliation, weeping "between the porch and the altar," and entreating the Lord to spare His people, and give not His heritage to reproach, when this prince in Israel flaunted his sin in the sight of the congregation, as if to defy the vengeance of God and mock the judges of the nation. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the high priest, rose up from among the congregation, and seizing a javelin, "he went after the man of Israel into the tent," and slew them both. Thus the plague was stayed, while the priest who had executed the divine judgment was honored before all Israel, and the priesthood was confirmed to him and to his house forever.

Phinehas "hath turned My wrath away from the children of Israel," was the divine message; "wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him My covenant of peace: and he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel."¹⁵

Covenant with David:

The psalms of David pass through the whole range of experience, from the depths of conscious guilt and self-condemnation to the loftiest faith and the most exalted communing with God. His life record declares that sin can bring only shame and woe, but that God's love and mercy can reach to the deepest depths, that faith will lift up the repenting soul to share the adoption of the sons of God. Of all the assurances which His word contains, it is one of the strongest testimonies to the faithfulness, the justice, and the covenant mercy of God.

Man "fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not," "but the word of our God shall stand forever." "The mercy of Jehovah is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep His covenant, and to those that remember His commandments to do them." Job 14:2; Isaiah 40:8; Psalm 103:17, 18.

"Whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever." Ecclesiastes 3:14.

Glorious are the promises made to David and his house, promises that look forward to the eternal ages, and find their complete fulfillment in Christ. The Lord declared:

"I have sworn unto David My servant . . . with whom My hand shall be established: Mine arm also shall strengthen him. . . . My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him: and in My name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand also in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers. He shall cry unto Me, Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation. Also I will make him My first-born, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him forevermore, and My covenant shall stand fast with him." Psalm 89:3-28.¹⁶

Noah: mercy and protection

Abraham: a large family and the inheritance of a homeland

Israel: animal sacrifices as a substitute to bear the sinner's guilt; and the wilderness Tabernacle

Phinehas: perpetual priesthood

David: perpetual kingship

All of these were only symbols of various aspects of the Plan of Salvation that would come to us through Jesus, as He lived and died and rose again to return to Heaven.

The New Covenant:

The covenants that we looked at above were all part of what the book of Hebrews later describes as the “New Covenant” between God and His people, called new because it was ratified by the blood of Christ. However, Hebrews also describes something called the First, or “Old” Covenant, which was based on earthly things, such as physical rituals, physical promises and physical blessings. The Old Covenant was made with the nation of Israel when the law was given at Sinai, but the people soon violated their promise to keep God’s law and broke the covenant. The New Covenant was based on heavenly things, spiritual promises and spiritual blessings.

Though this covenant was made with Adam and renewed to Abraham, it could not be ratified until the death of Christ. It had existed by the promise of God since the first intimation of redemption had been given; it had been accepted by faith; yet when ratified by Christ, it is called a new covenant. The law of God was the basis of this covenant, which was simply an arrangement for bringing men again into harmony with the divine will, placing them where they could obey God’s law.¹⁷

The book of Hebrews has much to say about Covenants. The word “Covenant” is only mentioned in 4 New Testament books besides Hebrews and no more than twice in any of them. However, it is mentioned 12 times in Hebrews. Paul is telling the Hebrew people what are the differences between the Old and New Covenants.

Here is a simple chart that summarizes the differences between the “Old” and “New” Covenants. Both are for the saving of sinners by faith in Christ's sacrifice, whether looking forward from the Israelites' perspective or looking backward from our perspective. All are saved in only one way—by faith in the sacrifice and life of Jesus.

First “Old” Covenant

Earthly priesthood: Aaron's family
Earthly Tabernacle
Earthly sacrifices: blood of animals
Earthly promises and blessings
Temporary earthly inheritance

Second “New” Covenant

Heavenly priesthood: Jesus
Heavenly Tabernacle
Heavenly sacrifice: blood of Jesus
Heavenly promises and blessings
Eternal Heavenly inheritance

What was faulty with the First Covenant?
Hebrews 8:7-9

What was to replace the faulty part?
Hebrews 7:22, 8:10-12

Who is our High Priest now?
Hebrews 4:14, 15

Where is the Tabernacle that He serves in?
Hebrews 9:11, 23, 24

What does He offer that is better?
Hebrews 9:12-14, 25, 26

What kind of inheritance is promised?
Hebrews 9:15

Summarize the kind of blessings that were promised to the Israelites.
Deuteronomy 28:3-9

What are some blessings that are promised through Jesus?
Matthew 5:3-12

God wants to be in covenant with each one of us. He also wants us to obey just as He wanted Israel to obey. His law still stands and through Jesus we can obey all that He asks of us, because He will write it on our hearts. Have you accepted the great sacrifice Jesus made for you? He is our heavenly High Priest now and has promised us a heavenly inheritance. Why not claim it for your own?