

Distinguishing Between the Covenants

Having established that God's written revelation to mankind is precious and profitable, we move into the realm of application. As we mentioned in Lesson 1, the master plan behind the Bible is rescue. From Genesis to Revelation, God's book is all about God's plan to rescue men and women from the ultimate problem of sin. Our responsibility begins with discernment.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but **understand** what the will of the Lord is.

- Ephesians 5.15-17

Notice what we can logically deduce, just from Ephesians 5.17. There is a Lord over humanity. This Lord has a will. His will can be understood. To live in willful ignorance of or rebellion against the will of the Lord is foolish.

The rest of this workbook is aimed at helping us live up to the Spirit's expectation expressed in Ephesians 5.15-17. God's written revelation to mankind is precious and profitable. Therefore, we would be wise to understand and apply it to our lives. And few things are more foundational to our understanding of God's will for our lives than to notice the Spirit-drawn contrast between the covenants of the Bible.

Covenants

A *covenant* can most easily be defined as "a relationship based on promises." Promises are often made between neighbors, friends, the rulers of different nations, and so on. The essence of a covenant is an understanding—**this is what you can expect from me; this is what I expect from you**. Such covenants between men existed throughout the Old Testament. In Genesis 31.44-45, Laban said to his nephew Jacob,

"Come now, let us make a **covenant**, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me." So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.

In 1 Samuel 18.1-3, we read of Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and his close relationship with David.

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a **covenant** with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

Even the marriages between men and women are described by God in the context of a covenant.

And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by **covenant**. (Malachi 2.13-14)

One of the special things about the Bible is that it records, defines, and encourages covenant relationships between human beings and God. In fact, the overarching themes of both the Old and New Testaments are set within the framework of two major covenants—the law delivered through Moses in the Old Testament, and the gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. We'll talk more about those in a moment.

Covenant Relationships with God in the Old Testament

On different occasions throughout the Old Testament, the Creator pledged himself and his blessings by promises to people. One of the earliest references to a covenant in the Bible occurs in the story of Noah and the flood. In Genesis 6.17-18, God told Noah,

"For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my **covenant** with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you."

Following the flood, in Genesis 9.8-17,

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my **covenant** with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my **covenant** with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the **covenant** that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the **covenant** between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my **covenant** that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting **covenant** between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the **covenant** that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

God defined his relationship with mankind based on a promise—never again to destroy the world and all of its inhabitants by water. He placed the rainbow in the sky as a sign and reminder of his covenant with the earth and every living thing. But, the covenant was accompanied by a code of conduct for Noah and his descendants.

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.

And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it.” (Genesis 9.1-7)

God established a covenant with mankind after the flood—a relationship based on promises. In essence he said, “This is what you can expect from me; this is what I expect from you.”

Years later, in Genesis 12.1-3, God made further promises to a man named Abram.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God desired a working relationship with Abram. He wanted to use Abram as a part of his ultimate rescue plan, and wanted to bless Abram in the process.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my **covenant** between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my **covenant** is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from

you. And I will establish my **covenant** between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting **covenant**, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my **covenant**, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my **covenant**, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the **covenant** between me and you. (Genesis 17.1-11)

Once again, God was willing to establish a special relationship with Abraham—a covenant based on promises. “This is what you can expect from me; this is what I expect from you.”

The books of Genesis and Exodus chronicle the growth of the descendants of Abraham into a nation. Eventually, God raised up a leader in Moses and communicated with the people through him. God delivered this people from Egyptian bondage. He protected them and provided for them in the wilderness. He guided them to Mount Sinai and powerfully reminded them of their recent past—his deliverance of them, his fighting and providing for them. And on this basis of what they had seen and heard, he offered them a national covenant—a relationship based on promises.

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my **covenant**, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. (Exodus 19.3-8)

God offered a covenant to Abraham’s descendants—a relationship based on promises. “This is what you can expect from me; this is what I expect from you.” The people agreed, and God gave them a law.

But if you’re familiar at all with the Old Testament, you know that a prevailing theme from Exodus forward is Israel’s failure to live up to the terms of their covenant with God. He punished and disciplined them over and over again. They would cry out for mercy, and he would deliver them, only to watch as they returned to their unrighteousness. They deserved to be abandoned by God and obliterated for their rebellious negligence.

And yet, God had made a promise—a promise that went back all the way to the days of Abraham—and God is faithful. Because of the covenant he had made with Abraham, Abraham’s seed would not be completely cast off, even when they failed to live by the covenant agreement. Even in the darkest of ages, God’s grace continued to look, wait, and exhort a faithful remnant to stand strong. Listen to his very personal, heartfelt words in Isaiah 55.1-3, 6-7.

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

Seek the LORD while he may be found;
 call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
 and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
 and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

New Testament Commentary on God’s Covenant with Israel

The New Testament, in several places, establishes a fundamental change in God’s dealing with humanity—a difference between God’s covenant with Israel and a new covenant made available to all men and women through Jesus Christ.

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Likewise, my brothers, **you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead**, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful

passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now **we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.** (Rom 7.1-6)

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of **a new covenant**, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3.4-6)

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian **until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, **we are no longer under a guardian**, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3.26-29)

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and **strangers to the covenants of promise**, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have **been brought near** by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself **one new man** in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph 2.11-16)

The New Testament book of Hebrews extensively addresses the difference between the old and new covenants. If Hebrews has one key word, it's *better*. In the introductory section of the book, the writer shows that Jesus is a better messenger than either the prophets or the angels (Hebrews 1). As the apostle and high priest of our confession, he is better than Moses (Hebrews 3). He provides a better rest than was provided by Joshua (Hebrews 4). He is a better priest than were the Levites (Hebrews 5-7). Based on that *better* foundation, Hebrews 8 expounds on the *better* covenant made available through Jesus, which is established on *better* promises.

Why was a new covenant enacted? "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second" (Hebrews 8.7). The first covenant involved two parties: (1) God, who was represented by the book of the law, and (2) the people of Israel

(Exodus 24). Neither God nor his law was faulty (Romans 7.12). The people were at fault. They failed to keep the covenant instituted at Sinai.

For **he** finds fault with **them** when he says:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.” (Hebrews 8.8-9)

The New Testament clearly establishes that the Mosaic law had a purpose. But when that purpose was fulfilled, there was no longer a need for that law.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, **the law was our guardian until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, **we are no longer under a guardian**, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Galatians 3.19-26)

The old law of Moses is no longer in effect. The covenant of God with Abraham’s descendants has served its purpose. Christ has come, and we are no longer under that Old Testament guardian.

The New Covenant was a Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy

A key section of Scripture in the discussion of the change in covenants is God’s words through his prophet Jeremiah who prophesied from 626-586 B.C. In Jeremiah 31.31-34, God’s spokesman declared,

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put

my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

It is Jeremiah's words that are quoted in Hebrews 8.8-9. As is summarized in Hebrews 8.13, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." The old law brought to Israel through Moses was abolished as a religious institution at Christ's crucifixion (Colossians 2.14), and as a civil institution with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Three Outstanding Features of the New Covenant

The new covenant of Jesus Christ is "better." It is enacted on "better promises." In what way?

1. Emphasis is on the **heart**. A system of **inner** rather than outer emphasis; **spiritual** rather than external and formal (Hebrews 8.10). The first covenant was written on tablets of stone. The new covenant is written on the minds and hearts of men. Our wills—not just our outward actions—are brought into harmony with God's will (2 Corinthians 3).
2. **Universal knowledge** on the part of those who are in covenant relationship. There is no privileged class or order, such as a clergy or priesthood, standing between God and man. Under the old covenant, people were born into a covenant relationship with God as descendants of Abraham, circumcised on the 8th day as a sign of the covenant relationship, and taught later (Deuteronomy 6.6-7). Under the new covenant, all will know; all must be taught (John 6.44-45). This indicates that mature, responsible people come into this new covenant relationship, with an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.5).
3. **Absolute forgiveness of sins** (Hebrews 8.12). The old covenant couldn't provide this, as is developed in Hebrews 10.1-4. How pardon is provided and sins are covered by the sacrifice of Christ is revealed in Hebrews 9-10. Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1.29). This perfect high priest who offers the sacrifice necessary for the sins of all the world has become our new and better mediator.

The old covenant served a vital purpose in the development of God's plan for the redemption of mankind. For nearly 1,500 years the Mosaic system contained God's law for the Israelites. But that covenant has been superseded by a better covenant. Now, all men—both Jews and Gentiles—live under the framework of the new covenant.

When we understand this important shift and distinction between the covenants, we recognize that "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15.4). But we do not look to the Old Testament as our authority in worship to God and service to others. On this historical side of the cross, we are under the scope and authority of the New Testament of Jesus Christ.

Questions for Growth and Discussion

1. When you think of a *covenant*, what do you think of?
2. Are there any other covenants you can remember, particularly from the Old Testament, that human beings made with each other?
3. When God described marriage as a covenant in Malachi 2, there are powerful implications attached. Like what? How should our marriages be shaped by the recognition that God regards them as a covenant?
4. Is the covenant God made after the flood in Genesis 9 still binding today? Why or why not?
5. What about the covenant he made with Abraham in Genesis 17? Is that still binding today? Why or why not? If not, how should the nation of Israel be regarded today?
6. Circumcision was an undeniable part of God's covenant with Abraham's descendants (Genesis 17). How should circumcision be regarded today?
7. Why did God not abandon and obliterate Old Testament Israel for their rebellious negligence?
8. This lesson highlighted Romans 7, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2 as New Testament commentary on God's old covenant with Israel. Can you summarize the basic message of those passages?
9. In what way is the new covenant of Jesus Christ "better" than the old covenant with Israel?
10. What sort of practices and teachings from the Old Testament do modern religious people try to bind or rationalize that are not a part of the new covenant of Christ? What should our response be?