

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

I. Reconciliation with God

26. Our Covenanting God

Last time we saw that reconciliation with God can never happen except for the Grace of God by which he gives sinners the desire to repent of sin and take advantage of the atonement offered by Christ. Today, we continue with this matter of reconciliation by looking at the various covenants God has entered into with those he has claimed as his own.

The Scriptures of the Old Testament make clear that our God is a covenanting God—a God who enters into partnership with people. We don't often use the word "covenant" today, but when we do, we're usually talking about more or less equal partners who make promises to each other and then seal the promises in some appropriate way, for example, with binding oaths or signatures, sometimes notarized. Marriages, lease agreements, international treaties—these are all modern forms of covenants.

The parties in the Old Testament covenants, however, were not equal. How could they be? After all, God is the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe and able to do whatever he wants. But, although he needed no partners, he wanted them, and so God initiated several binding, though unequal, covenants with various people in Old Testament times.

These covenants were styled after two categories of covenants known in the ancient world: Royal Grant covenants and Suzerain-vassal covenants. Both presupposed a big disparity between the parties involved. The first was between a king or sovereign and his subjects. The second was between a superior king or nation and a less powerful king or nation, bound in some way to serve the former.

Royal Grants were grants of land or other gifts to those the king was pleased with. And such grants were typically given without conditions. Suzerain-vassal covenants, on the other hand, were conditional on the vassal's continuing loyalty and service. Faithful service resulted in blessings while disobedience and rebellion resulted in punishments. With this background, let's look at some of the covenants God made.

God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17): After the flood that destroyed the ancient world, God promised Noah (and his descendants) that he would never again destroy the world with a flood. It was clear that God wanted Noah's continuing service, for he gave him the same command he had given Adam and Eve in the beginning: "Be fruitful and increase in number, and fill the earth." Here, as before, this was not permission to live without regard to God, but to live in continuing dependence on him while enjoying the privileges and exercising the responsibilities God had given. Nevertheless, God didn't tie his promise to Noah's obedience. He gave it unconditionally.

God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:9-21): Sometime after Abraham's call by God, and after his move to the land where God told him to go, he received the seal of God's promises in a special ceremony. Before that point, Abraham and God were not officially bound to each other. By the sealing ceremony, however, both parties became bound in a covenant relationship.

Abraham had been wondering if and when God was ever going to fulfill his previous promise to give him and Sarah an heir. In fact, he had already sort of given up on it, and had been making plans to pass on his estate to his chief servant, Eliezer. But God gave Abraham a vision in which he repeated his promise of a son from Abraham's own body, and countless descendants through him. These descendants, God said furthermore, would take possession of the land to which Abraham had been led.

Abraham wondered how he could know this would happen. That's when the Lord took him through the solemn ceremony that would make God's promises binding. *"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. Gen 15:9-10*

This preparation was according to the custom in such covenants. Animals would be cut in half and the parties to the covenant would walk together between the halves to signify their blood oath that they were willing to die rather than violate the covenant. The unique thing in this covenant ceremony was that in Abraham's vision, it was not the parties to the covenant—God and Abraham—who passed between the pieces, but a smoking firepot and a blazing torch.

This is a little puzzling to us but Abraham knew what it meant. Smoke and fire were both symbolic of the presence of God, who later led the Israelites through the wilderness by a pillar of smoke and fire. And, when Moses met with God to receive the law (Ex 19:18) tells us, "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord [had] descended on it in fire."

So the smoke and fire both represented God, who by himself passed between the divided animals, thereby making himself solely responsible for keeping the covenant, both his part and Abraham's. Abraham's promise to serve the Lord was certainly implied by his very presence here in this land, and his concern for his heirs to keep covenant with God. But God was doing all the promising here. That makes this an unconditional promise of God, very like the promise he made to Noah that there would never be another world-destroying flood.

I've made this point elsewhere, but it bears repeating that this promise of God to Abraham of many descendants and a land to possess forever finds ultimate and continuing fulfillment in Christ. He is the everlasting home for all of Abraham's spiritual descendants. *"If you belong to Christ (cf Gal. 3:29), then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."*

God revisited Abraham about 15 years later to repeat his covenant promises and also to tell Abraham of his responsibilities. Abraham had known earlier that he was obligated to obey the Lord, but God was explicit now about his expectations of Abraham and his descendants. *This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you... My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Gen 17:10-13*

This version of God's covenant with Abraham is more like a suzerain-vassal treaty with certain conditions to be fulfilled. So the Abrahamic covenant is really a combination of unconditional and conditional promises. As to the former, God himself stood in for Abraham, ensuring that he and his descendants (those with his faith) would always enjoy God's blessings. But, they also had an obligation: to be blameless in their lives and keep the terms of the covenant.

The first sign of that obedience they would carry in their flesh. Circumcision was to be the outward sign of a heart and life devoted to serving God. It would cost Abraham and his descendants something. Just like the rest of their life-long obedience of faith, it would cost them some blood, pain, and effort.

The flesh that was cut away symbolized the removal of sin. That's why later Old Testament writers refer to the spiritual reality behind physical circumcision: And they urge the people of God to circumcise their hearts. Not to actually cut a piece off, but to remove the sin from their inner beings. Circumcision then, was a great reminder of how much God valued an obedient heart. And its neglect was a sign that one despised God.

That is why God commanded that whoever remained uncircumcised would forever be cut off from the people of God. But mere outward circumcision wasn't enough. For if one had cut flesh and an impure heart, he would also be cut off from God and his people. This means that although physical circumcision is no longer a requirement for God's people today, spiritual circumcision is. In fact, to come to God through Jesus Christ is to be spiritually circumcised.

Colossians 2:11-12 says, *"In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

Another important covenant in the Old Testament, and one that followed from God's covenant with Abraham, was the Mosaic (or Sinai) covenant—described in Ex. 19-24 and summarized in Deut. 11 and other places. The opening chapters of Exodus tell of God's preparations for getting Abraham's descendants to the place where he could make this covenant with them. They had just a shadowy memory of one God who ruled all the earth and heaven and who had made a promise to Father Abraham to make him into a nation and give him a land of his own. And they also knew that God required circumcision as a sign of allegiance, but they didn't know much more than this; all in all they were pretty ignorant about God and what he wanted.

Before God could make an effective covenant with Abraham's descendants, he had to deliver them from Egypt, where the Pharaoh was regarded as the head of a pantheon of gods, but there was no appreciation for the one true God. So the Lord raised up Moses to lead the exodus. Afterwards, at Mt. Sinai, God told the people why he had done it (Exod 19:4-6): *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*...

You can see that this was a covenant with conditions: "If you obey me fully, then you will be my treasured possession." The conditions included God's Ten Commandments and many other rules, all of them designed to keep the people in a good relationship with the God who had rescued them and to help Israel serve as God's representatives to the rest of the world.

Exodus 24:4-11 describes the covenant confirmation ceremony. It began with Moses building an altar at the foot of Mt. Sinai and setting up twelve stone pillars representing the tribes of Israel. After offering sacrifices Moses read the book of the Covenant to the people and they responded by committing to obey everything that the Lord had said. Moses then sprinkled blood on the people as a sign of the significance of the oath they were making.

Afterwards, Israel's leaders were permitted to see God without dying, and eat and drink in his presence. It was a glimpse of the sort of relationship God wanted with the whole nation and which was symbolized by the tabernacle God commissioned for the middle of Israel's camp.

The book of Deuteronomy is especially concerned with spelling out the curses and blessings associated respectively with disobedience and obedience to the covenant. The blessings included health and well-being for children, livestock, crops, etc. Plus protection from enemies, prosperity, and, as God put it, "success in all you do." And the curses were just the opposite; they spelled disaster for children, livestock, and crops, as well as lack of protection from enemies, poverty, failure, disease, slavery, sorrow, pain, scorn, etc. Disobedience would inevitably leave the people despairing and terrorized. In Lev 26:33, God tells the people that if they break his covenant "*I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins.*"

And yet, a little further on in the same chapter (v. 44-45), God says, "*Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD.*"

Although the Mosaic covenant was conditional, there was also an unconditional aspect to it. To put it in a nutshell, God was telling them, "If you disobey my law, you'll pay the penalty for it, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to give up on the idea of teaching a people to serve and love me. I'll never give up on that."

In consideration of the blessings and curses associated with this covenant, Moses exhorted the people (Deut 30:11-20): *I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands... then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you... But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land...*

Presumably the people chose life, for Moses arranged for a successor, Joshua, who would assume the leadership for the next stage in Israel's journey: the conquest of Canaan. While Joshua was alive, although life was not without considerable hardships, Israel remained more or less faithful and as a result experienced many blessings. But after he died, the situation deteriorated and instead of unified obedience, the book of Judges tells us, there were repeated and extended periods of time when everyone "did as he saw fit."

One of the better times in Israel's history was during the reign of David, with whom God made another significant covenant. This took the form of an unconditional royal grant covenant, in which God promised to bless David's family line and assured him of a kingdom that would never end. "*When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*" (2 Sam. 7:12-13).

David would later see Solomon as the guarantor of his dynasty and the one who fulfilled God's promise. And Solomon did build the house (the temple) that David had in mind. But David could not have foreseen an even greater offspring who would himself be the temple of God and who would have an everlasting kingdom. But this is just what the angel who announced Jesus' birth to Mary told her (Luke 1:32-33): *"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of His father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Christ reigns now. And the one who is the eternal and perfect temple of God also makes those who follow him share in that glory. As the apostle Paul put it to the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 3:16): "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"

However, it was a long road between God's promise to David and the fulfillment of this covenant in Jesus Christ. Although the line of David continued unbroken and some of his descendants were faithful to lead God's people in covenant faithfulness, many others were disobedient. And people suffered as a result. Eventually, the nation became so disobedient that God allowed its destruction. The people were exiled from the Promised Land and both Jerusalem and God's temple were destroyed. For a time it appeared that God's plan for Israel to be for him a kingdom of priests and holy nation was dead.

It never was, though. Even during the disintegration and destruction visited upon God's people for dishonoring his covenant, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of God's plan to bring them back from captivity (Jer. 31:16-17) and also his plan to establish a new covenant with them (Jer. 31:31-34). *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

Hebrews makes clear (ch 8-9) that Christ is the mediator of this new covenant. And it also compares the glories of it to the Mosaic covenant. That covenant involved a fearful meeting between a holy God and an unholy people. But the new covenant, involves a joyful meeting with God because of the perfect sacrifice for sin offered by Jesus, the mediator of it.

Heb 12:22-24 *"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*

This new covenant thus helps explain what God was working toward in all the other covenants he made. We who are in Christ are called and enabled to be the faithful people he had in mind all along. And we have a glorious future with him.