

What is God's covenant?

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The main division in the Bible is between the Old and New Testament. In the Bible, “testament” usually means “covenant”. So we can also speak of a division between the Old and New Covenant. What is a covenant? And why is it so important? We will explore this.

The covenant in Genesis

The covenant in the Bible is essential to the dealings between God and man. After the fall of the first man, Adam, mankind and the earth become more and more separated from God. It even gets to the point where God decides to undo creation and destroy all life on earth with a great flood. However, God established a covenant with Noah that Noah and his family were not swallowed up by the waters of the flood (Genesis 6:18). That is the first time that a covenant is mentioned in the Bible. After the Flood, God establishes a covenant with all survivors of the Flood, both human and animal. God promises that the earth will

not perish by water again. The rainbow is the sign of this covenant (Genesis 9:8-17).

The flood did not clear the earth of sin. People were still quick to sin. They built a tower which was explicitly against God's command. God therefore scatters them across the earth and makes a new start with one man, Abraham. With him God makes a covenant that is central to the remainder of the Bible. God promised Abram a rich blessing (Genesis 12:2-3): "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." This promise is applied in the New Testament to Christ, the Mediator through whom all the earth receives the blessing, namely salvation.

The promise of salvation to Abraham was put in the form of a covenant in Genesis 17: "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” (Genesis 12:7). The sign of this covenant is circumcision (Genesis 12:10-11). In Genesis 15, God also made a covenant with Abraham in which the land of Canaan was promised to him. Abraham had to divide some animals into pieces and God passed between the pieces in the form of a burning torch. This shows that God took responsibility for the covenant.

The covenant with Abraham passed to his son, Isaac, and then to Isaac’s son, Jacob. God did not make a new covenant with them, but confirmed His promises. Thus, He spoke to Jacob at Bethel, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” (Genesis 28:13-14). So, the covenant and promise are confirmed to the descendants of Abraham!

The Sinaitic covenant

The descendants of Jacob grew into a great nation. After years of slavery in Egypt, God redeemed His people; He “remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). The Lord led the people to Sinai, where another covenant was made. The foundation and core of this “Sinaitic covenant” is the old covenant with Abraham. God gave the people His law and provisions (Exodus 20-23) and the people confirmed their agreement by promising obedience (Exodus 24:7). The establishment of the covenant took place with animal sacrifices and sprinkling of blood.

Blood sprinkling is central to the entire covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. God could dwell with the people only if the sacrifices were brought in the right way. When the people did not do this or otherwise rebelled, horrific punishments often followed. We can read of these in the book of Numbers. The book of Joshua is about the conquest of the land of Canaan. God has kept His word: finally, the people have been

given possession of the promised land. How would they fare in that land? That is what the stories in Judges, Samuel and Kings tell us.

It turns out to be a very unfortunate history. Although the people of Israel had promised God that: “we will serve the LORD our God, and we will obey his voice” (Joshua 24:24), it soon became clear that the people were incapable of this or simply did not feel like it. The list of covenant breaches is long: they served idols, gave nothing to the poor, and disregarded God’s law. The punishment could not fail to come upon such disobedience. Time after time, God sent enemies, famines or other disasters to bring them to repentance.

Often this had some temporary impact. There were God-fearing kings like Hezekiah and Josiah who renewed the covenant with God and worked diligently to reform the land. But in time, Israel returned to sin. Eventually, this history ended with the destruction of Jerusalem with its temple and the exile to Babylon. Was the covenant

between God and Abraham and his descendants now broken? No, it was not!

The covenant with David

God always remains faithful to His covenant. But His ways can never be predicted. Just as God chose Abraham from all mankind and made a covenant with him, so God chose David from all the people of Israel to make him king. God promised David a descendant who would be king forever: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” (2 Samuel 7:12-13). The covenant with Abraham took on a special focus with David and the kingship of Judah. On this promised future king rested all the expectation and hope!

When Jerusalem lay in ruins and the king was deposed, nothing seemed to remain of God’s covenant. The disaster the prophets had warned for so long had now occurred. Israel had broken the covenant countless times.

And now God was taking His hands off the people. Israel had a hard time coming to terms with this trauma. In the words of Psalm 89:38-40, “But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust. You have breached all his walls; you have laid his strongholds in ruins.”

Now what? Daniel prayed on the basis of the covenant (Daniel 9) for an end to the exile. And indeed, God was faithful and allowed Israel to return to its land. The city and the temple were rebuilt, but the splendor of old was gone and the promised king had not yet appeared. Thus ends the Old Testament, full of questions and unfulfilled promises. In many ways, the New Testament is the answer to the Old. Therefore, let us now examine what the New Covenant has to say to us.

A new covenant

Already under the old covenant, God announced a new covenant by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah puts it as follows: “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. For 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.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

God does not make a totally different covenant, but the covenant with Israel enters a new phase with the fulfillment of this prophecy. Characteristic of the new covenant is the internalization of God’s law. This law is now written in the hearts, instead of being merely engraved on stone tablets. Israel always had great difficulty in keeping the law. Under the new covenant, this

will happen naturally, because God will circumcise their hearts. Everyone will know the Lord and they will even teach others. Everything is much fuller and richer under the new covenant than under the old covenant. Ezekiel adds that the Messiah, God's servant David will be king over the people. The people will live again in the land of their fathers and "David my servant shall be their prince forever" (Ezekiel 37:25). When was all this fulfilled?

The covenant in the New Testament

The author of Hebrews gives a clear answer to the above question: Jesus Christ is the promised Son of David and He is the Mediator of the new covenant. In Him the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled. Other apostles also write in many ways that God has kept His word and is keeping His covenant with Israel in sending His Son to earth.

For example, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel he wrote, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he

spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us” (Luke 1:68-73). This is a hymn of praise to God’s mercy and covenant faithfulness.

Now the Messiah is coming, who had already been promised to Abraham. God’s covenant with Israel was thus reaffirmed. God always remains faithful. The sacrificial service under the old covenant gives way to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The old dispensation where outward rules were important is transformed into a spiritual dispensation. The Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and He realizes the promise from Jeremiah 31. Jesus also institutes a new covenant sign, the Lord’s Supper, in which He calls the cup “the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20).

The blood that was so central to the old covenant pointed toward the blood that Jesus gave to confirm the covenant between God and man. Only through Jesus, the covenant mediator, is a covenant between the holy God and sinful man possible! Baptism is also a sign of this new covenant. God thereby confirms His promises.

But alas, Israel went wrong again by rejecting their Messiah. Jesus did not meet their expectations. He did not look like a mighty king. However, they did not understand that Jesus wanted much more than outward power. Jesus wanted their hearts. Jesus was radical and told them bluntly that it is not enough to be physical children of Abraham. Covenant children have all kinds of privileges, but also a great responsibility to serve God with their hearts and be an example to the other nations. Because the Jews did not do this and rejected God's Messiah, God brought the Gospel to the Gentiles.

This was also a promised extension of the covenant. Henceforth, believers from the Gentiles were included in the covenant. Paul writes of them, "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” (Ephesians 2:12-14). The separation between Israel and the Gentiles was removed by Christ. The vast majority of believers today are not Jews, but “Gentiles”, people from outside Israel. Through Christ, they are included in God’s covenant!

But what has become of God’s covenant with the people of Israel? Paul wrestles with this question in the letter to the Romans. It is certain to him that God’s promises do not fail and that He remains faithful to the old covenant: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” (Romans 11:1). After Paul analyzes all kinds of prophecies, he concludes that the unbelief of the Jews is only temporary. A remainder will be saved.

When the fullness of the Gentiles is reached, Israel will also come to repentance and be accepted back into the covenant: “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” (Romans 11:25-27). Thus, we look forward together to a mighty future. The other believing nations now have the task of being an example to Israel as true covenant children, until that time arrives.

Conclusion

We have made a tour through the Bible. We discovered that the covenant is essential to how God deals with people. A covenant is a relationship between two parties. The Bible is primarily about God’s relationship with His people. This is not an equal relationship. The covenant proceeds from God. He always takes the initiative. God

commits Himself to the people through a promise of salvation. Human beings are then expected to have faith and exercise obedience. We observed that the focus of God's covenant became narrower and narrower throughout history, until everything came together in Jesus Christ, the covenant mediator.

From Jesus, however, the covenant comes to all peoples throughout the earth. Believers from the Gentiles now have the same privileges and responsibilities as Israel. God promises us His salvation and wants to include us in His covenant. We are subsequently expected to believe in the promise and obey Him as His child. If we turn out to be an insincere child of the covenant, the same punishment threatens as Israel suffered (Hebrews 3:7-4:13). Thank God that nobody needs to doubt God's faithfulness in His covenant. The entire Biblical history testifies to His steadfast love and mercy that He wants to enter into a covenant with human beings! Through the Cross, He has made this possible.

