

COVENANTS - INTRODUCTION
[WITH MOSAIC/SINAI COVENANT AS EXAMPLE]
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INTRODUCTION

Why should we study covenants? Three reasons :

- Because they are a recurring theme throughout the Bible
 - Where? (ask people to suggest)
 - Noah (Genesis 6:18, 9:9-17)
 - Abraham & his descendants (Genesis 15:18, 17:1-21)
 - Israel (Exodus 6:2-8) = extension of Abraham's covenant
 - Israel (Exodus 19:1-6) = birth of nation at Sinai
 - Sabbath "a perpetual covenant" (Exodus 31:16-17)
 - David (Psalm 89 especially verses 3, 28, 34; and Psalm 132:11-12)
 - God's servant is the covenant to the nations (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:5-13)
 - New covenant (Isaiah 59:21, Jeremiah 31:31-34, 32:37-41, Hebrews 8:6-13, 9:13-10:25)
- Because it is an essential part of God's nature :
 - He is a covenant-making God (see above) - "I will make a covenant with you..."
 - He is a covenant-keeping God
 - I Kings 8:23-24, Nehemiah 1:5, Psalm 105:7-11, Psalm 111 (read it all, note especially 5&9), Isaiah 54:9-10
 - We need to understand covenants if we are to understand his heart towards us
- Because we are intended to benefit from them
 - We need to know what is ours through the covenants, claim it and receive it
 - There are both rights and responsibilities for us associated with covenants

DEFINITION

What is a covenant?

Not a term we are very familiar with today :

- Giving money to family, friends or charities
- Restrictive covenants = form of legal agreement

Instead we have ... ?? (ask) ... contracts

- We live in a legalistic contractual adversarial litigious society, ruled by contracts

But covenants were very common in Bible times, well understood form of agreement. Dozens of treaty covenants have been found in Middle East, mostly dating 2000-1000 BC, especially those made between Hittites and their subject nations between 1700-1200 BC.

There were four types of covenant in Old Testament times;

1. International treaties, usually between a superior power and vassal states. "Benefits" of protection were offered in exchange for loyalty, tribute and obedience. [A bit like Mafia protection!]
2. Constitutional ordinances, between king and subjects - laws, taxes et - requires loyalty & obedience.
3. Formal "parity covenants", between equal partners, with mutual obligations & responsibilities - contracts, oaths.
4. Informal personal agreements, binding promises between individuals -friendship, alliance, marriage - mutual and equal benefits.

Question : Which type best represents the covenants between God and people?

Answer : Biblical covenants involving God are a mixture of these types, and show aspects of all four. Biblical covenant language is similar to the treaty involving a superior power with vassal states (1), but without the threats of vindictive retribution in case of rebellion! They are most like a king offering terms to his people (2).

Note that the covenants of God have different scope, ranging from covenants with :
individuals, families, nations and all of nature

Ask for examples of each ...

- Abraham (individual)
- David and his descendants (family)
- Israel (nation)
- Noah (all nature)

Note continuity of terms between these - look out for these during these studies!!

Each covenant must be seen in the context of previous covenants which God had made, as there is a continuity and flow of purpose between them all.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COVENANTS

All covenants show four characteristics :

1. Depends on an existing relationship between covenanting parties. Out of the relationship, one party initiates a covenant towards the other
2. Based on a commitment from the initiator to provide benefits
3. The initiator usually gives some security or guarantee that the benefits will be provided
4. Requires response of acceptance on part of recipient in order to realise benefits

These four characteristics are also found in Biblical covenants :

1. God always takes the initiative out of the relationship he has with people - he is a God of grace and promise. Frequently find the phrase "I will make a covenant with you."
2. God always makes a commitment to do something, and every Biblical covenant has specific promises.
3. God offers the security of his own name and character as guarantee for his promise - "By myself I have sworn..."
4. Man's response is required in order to benefit. This has two parts :
(i) faith (God means what he says and can deliver the benefits as promised);
(ii) obedience (we will fulfil any conditions laid down by God in order to receive the benefits).

Note distinctive Hebrew view of covenant - very different from our Greek-based view:

- "Covenant" in Greek is *diatheke*, from *dia* = "in order to" + *theo* = "put down, establish".
- But the Hebrew word is *bereet*, from *barah* meaning "to eat", i.e. based on a two-way relationship involving commitment. Some Biblical covenants between people were sealed by eating together (e.g. Genesis 26:26-30 Abimelech and Isaac, Genesis 31:43-46 Laban and Jacob)

What other covenant can you think of where it was sealed with a meal???

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COVENANTS AND CONTRACTS

Remember that we don't use covenants today very often, we are more familiar with contracts.

Two words for the same thing?

Exercise : In two groups, 5 minutes to identify differences between contracts and covenants

Key differences :

- Contract requires : offer & acceptance (or counter-offer), consideration from both parties, intent of both parties to form a contractual relationship, ability of both parties to perform their part of the contract, and a legal framework within which the contract is performed
 - Contract is mutual, 2-way, with equal parties, each has rights and responsibilities
- Covenant requires : offer & acceptance (one-way from initiator, take it or leave it), all benefits flow from initiator to recipient (one-way), relies on initiator's intention and ability to deliver as promised, and secured by initiator's word and guarantee.
 - Covenant is one way, totally dependent on the initiator

Modern example : marriage - is it a covenant or a contract?

Before you answer, listen to the vows : [Phil & Bobs??]
Clearly a covenant!!

THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING COVENANTS

God does not need to enter into covenants, they don't satisfy some lack in him ...

So why does he?

Because of **grace** - the key to understanding God's covenants.
All are expressions of grace

But what is grace? Ask for definitions ...

- (children's song) - Grace is when God gives us the things we don't deserve ... he does it because he loves us..."
- (traditional definition) - the free and unmerited favour of God
- (Philip Yancy "What's so amazing about grace?") "There is nothing you can do to make God love you less; There is nothing you can do to make God love you more."
- (acronym) God's Riches At Christ's Expense

In every case of covenant, it is an expression of the grace of God - impossible to understand covenants without understanding grace. [Subject of LW series in Autumn]

EXAMPLE COVENANT - THE SINAI COVENANT (aka MOSAIC COVENANT)

Read Exodus 19:1-6

Mount Sinai was where God delivered the constitution which established Israel as God's people and gave them nationhood. It was delivered in the form of a covenant, a treaty where God was the chief partner and initiator, and the subjects were Israel.

Note that these people already had a relationship with God ("Let *my people* go"), out of this God took the initiative ("You have seen what I did").

What are the promised benefits? Verses 5-6 :

- my own possession among all peoples
- you shall be to me a kingdom of priests
- a holy nation

God promised protection, provision, presence ...

[not time to explore these in detail - another study?!]

But there are also conditions - if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant
Obedience and faithfulness

Israel accepted God's terms - see Exodus 24:3-8 - sealed with a blood sacrifice - taking God as their king and lawmaker, responsible for government of Israel (a theocracy).

The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy are not the treaty terms of the covenant itself, they are simply the record of the treaty. The treaty text is defined in Deuteronomy 4:13 "And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is the ten commandments, and he wrote them upon two tablets of stone."

The conditions of the covenant are the ten commandments - this is what we are to keep, our side of the bargain, in order to receive the benefits of the covenant, i.e. to be his special people, kings, priests, holy.

Do we know them? Exercise : List them!!!

1. No other gods before me
2. No graven images
3. Not take the name of the Lord in vain
4. Remember the sabbath to keep it holy
5. Honour your father and mother...
6. Not kill (murder)
7. Not commit adultery
8. Not steal
9. Not bear false witness
10. Not covet

Note two tablets of stone - traditionally thought to have been 4+6 - but now thought to be two copies. Why?

- Common practice to have 2 copies of treaty between 2 parties - each kept one copy to be sure that other did not change terms. Copies were kept in the most holy place of the nation.
- God told Moses that both copies should be kept together in the ark of the covenant. His "most holy place" was the same as theirs - a symbol that his home was with them. The ark was the centre of the nation, and the place where God dwelled - where God met man - over the terms of their covenant together.

[picture] - example of ancient treaty text from north Syria, dated about 1480BC

[cartoon] - Note that God write the 10 commandments himself in his own handwriting on the stone - what might have happened if God had issued them by computer??!

[picture] - Mount Sinai, modern Jebel Musa (Mount of Moses) in southern Sinai.

Note that the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy record the treaty but are not themselves the treaty text. They follow the common format of treaty texts of the time :

- Title of covenant/treaty
- Historical background
- Requirements for benefits to be received
- Instructions on how to keep treaty text
- Instructions on how to make sure everyone knows about the treaty
- Witnesses to original signing
- Curses if treaty is broken
- Blessings if it is kept

[exercise at home - identify these elements in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy]

Brief look at some of the features of the covenant - see Leviticus 26

- Verses 3-13 describe the blessings (the results of God's **grace** freely offered to us)
- Verses 14-39 detail the curses (his **judgement** which we deserve if we fail to meet his standards) - If we fail, does he write us off? No...
- Verses 40-45 give the possibility of a renewed covenant (God's **mercy** at work)

EXERCISE - 10 minutes group work, 10 minutes feedback & discussion

In two groups, list blessings and curses in Leviticus 26 (one each)

- Do we see any parallels with these things today, in our church, our nation, or our personal lives?
- Are we keeping or breaking the covenant? We can probably tell by the results, whether we see the blessings or the curses!

SUMMARY

Covenants are really important, a key theme throughout the Bible, so we need to understand them.

God regularly and habitually makes covenants, it's in his nature, it is how he relates to people.

Covenants are one-way offers of grace - this is why they are the foundation of the relationship between God and man - he has everything, we have nothing!

He always takes the initiative, and we always benefit - **if** we accept his terms, obey his commands, and remain faithful. So - will we??!

QUESTIONS?

HOMEWORK

Compare and contrast the giving of the covenant at Sinai with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - parallels, similarities and differences? Very exciting!!

(Answers in 3 weeks!)