

## Heritage Bible Church

### Biblical Covenants

#### Introduction

- I. Why should *every Christian* care about the biblical covenants?
  - A. The covenants God has made with humans structure God's purposes in creation and redemption.
  - B. They govern what God is doing in different eras of human history and how He is accomplishing His purposes through the people with whom He is in covenant.
  - C. Every Christian is a *participant* in a particular covenant (the New Covenant).
    - 1) To understand their *location* and *function* in redemptive history, Christians must understand the covenants and how they work together.
    - 2) Understanding the big picture overview of how God is working in human history and how Christians are a part of that should give shape and purpose to how they live their daily lives and should cause them to worship the one true God with whom they are in covenant.
  - D. **Goals of our study**
    - 1) **PURPOSEFUL OBEDIENT LIVING: Change daily living to be in line with God's working through the biblical covenants.**
    - 2) **GRATEFUL LOVING FAITHFUL WORSHIP: Stand in awe of and delight in the one true God Who is at work in history.**
- II. What is a "covenant"?
  - A. *A covenant is a solemn commitment to a particular relationship, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both parties, sealed with an implicit or explicit oath.*<sup>3</sup>
  - B. A covenant is a commitment to a relationship.
    - 1) The relationship may already exist prior to the making of the covenant but the covenant defines the relationship in a particular way.
    - 2) Because it is a commitment to a relationship, a covenant is more than a business contract.
    - 3) The relationship may be peer-to-peer or superior to inferior
    - 4) The relationship may be human-to-human, nation-to-nation, or God-to-human.
    - 5) The relationship may be based in mutual distrust (e.g. Jacob and Laban), on friendship (e.g. Jonathan and David), benevolence and grace (e.g. God and Abraham) or other motivations.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, edited by D. A. Carson, Vol. 23, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007) 43.

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- C. A covenant guarantees promises or obligations.
- 1) The guarantee of the covenant relationship may rest solely on one party (unilateral) or on mutually fulfilled obligations by both parties (bilateral).
  - 2) Obligations may include protection, gifts, no trespassing policies, denial of certain activities, etc.
- D. Since a covenant is solemn, an oath is made to seal the solemn commitment.
- 1) The nature of the oath was negative in nature: "If I break my obligations or promises, then I am accepting upon myself such and such consequences."
  - 2) In the OT, this is clearly seen in God's covenant oath with Abraham where God's presence passed through animals divided in half.
    - i. By walking through the animals cut in half, a covenant participant was vowing, "If I break this covenant, may I be cut in half just like these animals."
    - ii. In the OT, this is why the action of creating a covenant is often described as "cutting a covenant."
- E. Marriage is the most familiar form of covenant today.
- 1) Marriage is spoken of as a covenant in the Scriptures (Prov 2:16-17, Mal 2:14) with God as the witness of the oaths taken in the marriage ceremony.
  - 2) It is instructive that in the OT and the NT, the marriage relationship is consistently used as a picture of the relationship between God and His people (cf. Hosea, Eph 5:22-33).
- F. Covenants often include signs.
- 1) Signs are markers designed to bring the covenant to remembrance to the covenant participants.
  - 2) Signs can be particular *objects* (e.g. a pile of stones or a wedding ring) or particular *actions* (e.g. circumcision)
- G. Loyally keeping the covenant is described as faithfulness and steadfast love<sup>4</sup>.

III. What "biblical covenants" are we studying?

- A. There are dozens of covenants in the Scriptures (e.g. Jacob and Laban, Israel and the Gibeonites, David and Jonathan, the Abrahamic Covenant, etc.), but we will focus only on the God-to-human covenants.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, "steadfast love" is a loyal covenant love and is translated in other English versions as "lovingkindness," "mercy," "faithful love," "faithfulness," or even simply "love."

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- B. In particular, we will examine the Noahic, Abrahamic, Israelite, Priestly, Davidic, and New covenants.
- C. All of these covenants between God and man are clearly made between a superior (King) to an inferior (servant).

IV. How we will study the biblical covenants

- A. God's covenants with men are consistent with one another and God's purposes in creation, are tightly interconnected for the implementation of God's redemptive purposes, and build on one another.
- B. Each successive covenant grows more specific in its application as God unfolds more of redemptive history.
- C. The covenants can be viewed as the rungs of a ladder, each in line with the last leading to the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes.



- D. We will study each covenant in turn, but we must ground our study in God's purposes in creation and redemption, and we must seek to see how each of the covenants connects with each other and God's redemptive plan.

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**The Beginning: Creation, the Fall, and God's Redemptive Plan**

- I. There is debate about whether the relationship between God and Adam and Eve at creation is a covenant.
- II. Whatever one's position, it is clear from God's act of creation, that Yahweh had a *solemn commitment* to and purpose for mankind.
  - A. Gen 1:26-31—The Triune God creates man in His image to have dominion over the earth.
    - 1) Image (like a statue)→live representative and display of God's kingship over everything (ancient near eastern kings used to do this to display their rule and authority in a location)
    - 2) "Be fruitful and multiply"→ Offspring are part of the mandate of exercising dominion so that God's image and His glory might be displayed throughout the whole of His empire.
    - 3) Gen 2:15 demonstrates that *dominion* does not mean *exploitation*.
    - 4) The mandate for dominion is a complementary venture between man and woman, reflecting the diversity and unity of the Trinity (Gen 1:27, Gen 2:18-25).
    - 5) It is interesting to note that marriage is a covenant relationship (as attested elsewhere in Scripture) instituted before the fall and is an often used picture of God's relationship with His people, a relationship that began with His first people: Adam and Eve.
  - B. The relationship that Yahweh instituted is one based in grace with resulting stipulations.
    - 1) The relationship is based on grace because man cannot enjoy the relationship without God graciously creating him to begin with!
    - 2) Gen 2:15-17 shows that even in this relationship of pure grace, mankind has commands to obey as a *result* (not the foundation) of the relationship Yahweh initiated.
  - C. Mankind in this relationship is a race of steward-kings under God's ultimate rule.
- III. God *resting* on the seventh day of creation punctuates the goodness, peace, and perfection of the created order.
- IV. Man violates the stipulations of His intimate relationship with God.
  - A. Man as a steward-king seeks to usurp Yahweh's throne as ultimate king after being incited by the Serpent (Gen 3:1-7).
  - B. Yahweh faithfully executes the curse He promised for disobedience—physical and spiritual death.
  - C. In Gen 3:14-15 the midst of the curse upon the Serpent, God by grace holds out a promise of redemption for mankind.

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- 1) A male seed/offspring *from the woman* will succeed where Adam failed and deal a death blow to the Serpent and his designs.
  - 2) Based on the Serpent's placement in the story, dealing him a death blow would bring humanity back to similar state before he stepped onto the scene to incite the Fall.
  - 3) This promise forms the foundation upon which the biblical covenants are grounded.
- D. Gen 3:21 shows that Yahweh is the one who graciously provides a covering for the consequences of sin through sacrifice so that mankind can still enjoy a relationship with God.
- V. The rest of redemptive history is God re-establishing the kingdom conditions of Gen 1-2, and the covenants are the ladder steps of that reestablishment.
- A. The eternal state described at the end of Revelation includes much of the same imagery from the first two chapters of Genesis, including the tree of life.
  - B. Several key themes and terms introduced in Gen 1-2 will be weaved throughout the biblical covenants and picking up on those terms and themes will help in understanding how the covenants interrelate to one another.
  - C. Key Themes: dominion/kingdom, (seventh day) rest, offspring/seed, sacrifice, and Edenic/creation conditions correlated with Yahweh's intimate presence

**The Noahic Covenant**

- I. Genesis 5, the "chapter of death" demonstrates God's faithfulness to the consequences of breaking the conditions of the pre-fall relationship with Yahweh.
- A. Because of Gen 3:15 and the promise of the male offspring, the rest of the account of Genesis is concerned with "finding" the offspring.
    - 1) This is the reason for Eve's excitement over the first birth.
    - 2) This is why genealogies in Genesis and the whole Bible are so important and worth our attention.
  - B. The genealogy continues with a similar pattern of death until 5:28-29.
    - 1) "Noah" is related to the Hebrew word for *rest*.
    - 2) Lamech in his reason for naming Noah what he does uses a verb meaning "to comfort" where the verb and Noah's name sound similar in Hebrew.
    - 3) Lamech is saying that through his son Yahweh will reverse the curse pronounced in Gen 3.
- II. Gen 6:5-7 describes the increasing evil and corruption on the earth and God's plan to wipe out mankind.

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- A. Disastrous news in light of God's promise of redemption in Gen 3:15
- B. Hope held out through Noah (Gen 6:8-9, 18)
  - 1) By grace, God provides a way to maintain his promise through Noah.
  - 2) First use of the term "covenant" in the whole Bible
  - 3) The covenant is not ratified at this point, but only after Noah acted in faith upon what God was telling Him to do through constructing the ark.
  - 4) Notice that Noah already has a relationship with Yahweh *before* the covenant is formally ratified.
- III. The Flood is presented as a de-creation of what God had made (Gen 7:11-24)
  - A. Similar language as in the creation account: "heavens," "beasts," "kinds," etc.
  - B. Waters covering everything just as described in Gen 1:2.
- IV. God and preserves Noah and his family.
  - A. Yahweh *remembers* Noah; this is covenant language (Gen 6:8).
  - B. The process of the earth drying out is essentially presented as a re-creation with Noah as a sort of new Adam (Gen 7:13-19)
- V. The establishment of God's covenant with Noah happens in Gen 8:20-9:17.
  - A. Notice that sacrifice (Gen 8:20-21) precedes Yahweh's formal ratification to Noah and his family about their inclusion in the covenant with its blessings and stipulations.
    - 1) Noah is thanking and worshiping God for preservation.
    - 2) Noah is recognizing that only through sacrifice is he able to have this gracious relationship with Yahweh and preservation from Yahweh's wrath in the Flood.
    - 3) Noah's sacrifice is what precipitates Yahweh's gracious enactment of the covenant.
  - B. God promises stability for the created order (Gen 8:20-22, 9:8-12). This enables the promise of Gen 3:15 to eventually take place.
  - C. Yahweh gives very similar commands to Noah and his family that he gave to Adam with some modifications because of the reality of sin in the world (Gen 9:1-7).
    - 1) God's ultimate purpose for mankind is still for God's own glory and dominion to be extended to the whole earth. The command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" still holds.

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- 2) Capital punishment is instituted as a way of checking human violence and provides a measure of social stability.
- 3) Man's sin does not ultimately stop Yahweh's creation purpose, and He even uses sinful people who have a relationship with Him by faith to bring carry forward His purpose for His glory.

D. The sign of the covenant is the rainbow (Gen 9:12-17).

- 1) God "remembers" His everlasting covenant with all flesh on the earth through the rainbow.
- 2) When you see a rainbow, you should also remember this covenant and meditate on how God is actively restraining His wrath against mankind, including you, even though you also have the same corruption in your heart that justly deserves God's wrath.

VI. Summary of the Noahic Covenant's role in redemptive history

- A. The Noahic Covenant provides stability in the created order, including the preservation of the human race, so that the promised serpent-crushing seed of the woman can redeem humanity.
- B. Through Noah, the human race will ultimately be freed from the curse of sin and returned to the creation rest that God built into the created order to begin with.

**Application Questions from Creation and the Noahic Covenant**

- I. Do you understand that your purpose as a human being is to image forth Yahweh's rule and dominion over everything? Are you doing that in your relationships, work, freetime, etc.?
- II. Do you thank and praise God for your participation in this covenant? God has every right to wipe you out this instant because of the corruption in your own heart, but he has preserved you and given you the opportunity for redemption through the serpent-crushing seed of the woman—Jesus of Nazareth.
- III. Have you trusted in the person and work of the serpent-crushing seed of the woman? Are you seeking the advancement of His kingdom?