

Covenants in the Bible

To understand the old and new covenants, we need to first understand what the word *covenant* means. In simple terms, it is a formal agreement. It may be an agreement between two people, a treaty between nations (for examples, see appendix 1 below), or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation. A covenant is more personal than a contract – it involves loyalty and allegiance, not just a financial exchange.

God has made several agreements or covenants with humans. He gives commands and makes promises. What does he command? What promises has he made?

This paper surveys every biblical covenant. In the conclusion, we will give special attention to passages in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews that clarify the difference between the old covenant made at Mt. Sinai and the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Of greatest importance today are the covenants that God made with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. God called Abram out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his offspring the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1-7). Abram went to Egypt, returned to Canaan, was generous to Lot, rescued Lot and gave tithes to Melchizedek (Gen. 12-14).

God then reaffirmed his promise that Abram would have offspring (15:1-4). God promised that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (15:5). This was a phenomenal promise, but "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Paul develops this statement further in Rom 4 and Gal 3.

God then repeated his promise to give Abram the land of Canaan, and Abram asked for evidence (Gen. 15:7-8). So God asked for some animals, and Abram cut in half a heifer, a goat and a ram, and also offered a dove and a pigeon (15:9-10). He arranged the pieces, but did not burn them.

God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep, and in a dream God affirmed that Abram himself would not possess the land, but his descendants would. A smoking firepot and a blazing torch then passed between the pieces of the sacrificed animals. In ancient custom, people making a covenant walked between the halves of a sacrificed animal as part of their oaths (Jer. 34:18-19 shows this

ancient custom, as does the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant -- literally, cutting a covenant).

In this dream and covenant, God was giving Abram evidence that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. This covenant that God made with the father of the faithful is also referred to in Neh. 9:8 and Gal 3:17.

Many years later, God confirmed his covenant, changing Abram's name to Abraham, since he would be the father of not just one nation, but of many nations (Gen. 17:1-6). He promised to renew the covenant with Abram's descendants -- not only that they would be numerous, but also that he would be their God (17:7). This is more than the original covenant promised. God also required more from Abraham and his descendants: Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant (17:9-14). The covenant was both renewed and expanded. Circumcision -- cutting the foreskin -- was a continuing reminder that God had cut a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This covenant is referred to in Acts 7:8 and Rom 4:11.

God promised that Abraham would have children not only through Hagar but also through Sarah (Gen. 17:15-17), and God promised to renew the covenant with Isaac (17:19-21).

At Bethel, God gave similar promises to Jacob (28:10-15; 35:11-13). We are not specifically told that this was a covenant, but it apparently was.¹ God referred to his covenant with Jacob and his covenant with Isaac and his covenant with Abraham, as if they were three distinct covenants (Lev 26:42), but he could also refer to them as one single covenant, since they contained the same promises (Ex 2:24; 2 Kings 13:23). The same basic covenant was renewed with each generation. Peter mentioned the covenant that God made with the fathers (plural), characterized by the promise given to Abraham (Acts 3:25). This covenant is also referred to in Ex 6:4-5.

The covenant at Mt. Sinai

God remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he brought their descendants out of slavery in Egypt. While they were on their way to the land of Canaan, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. As their ruler, he gave laws, and they agreed to keep them. "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant," he told them through Moses, "then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.... You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6).

The people said they would do everything the Lord had said (19:8). After God spoke the Ten Commandments, the people asked Moses to be their mediator for the remainder of the covenant (20:1-19). Through Moses, God then gave regulations about altars (20:22-26), servants and slaves (21:1-11), murder and sins against others (21:12-32), sins against personal property (21:33-22:15) and other laws of social responsibility (22:16-27; 23:1-9). There were rules about blasphemy, cursing, offerings, firstlings (22:28-30), Sabbath years and days, Holy Days and offerings (23:10-19). God spoke all these laws, and then promised to give the people the land of Canaan (23:20-31).

The Abrahamic covenant, although it included obligations, stressed God's promise. The Sinaitic covenant, although it included mercy and promises, stressed human responsibilities. Moses told the people the laws, and the people said, "Everything the Lord has said we will do" (24:3). And Moses wrote it all down.

The next day, they had sacrifices, Moses read the book of the covenant,² and the people again agreed to obey (24:4-7). So Moses sprinkled blood on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8). As Heb. 9:18-20 says, the first covenant was put into effect with blood. An animal was cut, and the people came under the covenant by being sprinkled with its blood.

The Ten Commandments formed the core of this covenant. "The words of the covenant -- the Ten Commandments" -- were written on tablets of stone (Ex 34:28). Although the covenant was equated with the Ten Commandments (Ex 34:28; Deut 4:13), the covenant included all of Ex 20-23. The Lord wrote "the law *and* commands I have written for their instruction" (Ex 24:12).

The tablets of stone were called the "tablets of the covenant" (Deut 9:9, 11, 15; Heb. 9:4). They were placed in the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:16, 21; 31:18), thus giving a name to the ark, and the covenant was said to be inside the ark (1 Kings 8:21; 2 Chron. 6:11).

In this covenant, the people agreed to be servants of God, and he agreed to protect them. The covenant was made not only with Israel as a nation, but also with Moses as its leader (Ex 34:10, 27). Many of the laws in Ex 34 are quoted from Ex 23. It was a covenant renewal or restatement with some variations. Heb. 9:1 says that original covenant also included regulations for worship and the sanctuary (Ex 25-30). The covenant was developed as time went on.

Although the Sabbath was part of the Ten Commandments (20:8-11), and part of the larger covenant (23:12), it was made its own covenant in Ex 31:16. Just as

circumcision was an everlasting covenant and a sign of Abraham's covenant (Gen. 17:10-11), the Sabbath was also called a sign and an everlasting covenant (31:12, 16-17). Just as circumcision was a covenant in conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath was a covenant in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant.

Also in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant was the weekly showbread, which was also called an everlasting covenant (Lev 24:8). An everlasting covenant was made with the priesthood, too (Num. 18:19; 25:13). Grain offerings were covenantized, too, since God commanded, "Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings" (Lev 2:13).

Covenant renewals

When the Israelites were ready to enter the promised land, Moses repeated to them the laws of God (Deut 1:1-5). He rehearsed some history, reminded the Israelites to obey God and worship him only, and he repeated the Ten Commandments. Although the people he was talking to were either not yet born or only children at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), Moses said that God had made the Sinaitic covenant with them, not with their parents (5:2-3).³

Moses not only repeated the Ten Commandments, but gave numerous other laws as well (Deut 6-26). After he described blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, he led the people to covenant anew with God to be his people. Most of the book of Deuteronomy then forms the "terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb" (29:1). The covenant was renewed and expanded. This Deuteronomistic covenant was built on the foundation of the Sinaitic covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Moses reminded the people that they were making a covenant with the Lord not only for themselves but also for their descendants (29:12-14), and he exhorted them to be faithful to this covenant (29:9). This was a confirmation of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs (29:13) – it was a development from that patriarchal covenant. Moses wrote down the Deuteronomistic law, and it was placed beside (not in) the ark of the covenant (31:9, 24-26).

The covenant was renewed in the days of Joshua (Josh 24:1-24), Asa (2 Chron. 15:12) and in the days of Joash (23:16). Hezekiah planned to make a covenant with God (29:10). Josiah and the Jews renewed the covenant, apparently the Deuteronomistic law (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chron. 34:31-32). Jeremiah called the people to obey the terms of the covenant they had made when their forefathers came out of Egypt (Jer. 11:2-6).⁴ In Jeremiah's day, the people made a covenant with God

(34:15), but they were going back on it, and God would treat them "like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces" (34:18).

Yet another covenant was made in the days of Ezra, in which the people agreed to put away their foreign wives and children (Ezra 10:3).

Throughout Israel's history, covenant was an important concept. They were the "people of the covenant land" (Eze. 30:5); their ruler was "the prince of the covenant" (Dan 11:22). An attack on the Jews was considered an attack "against the holy covenant" (11:28, 30). Paul noted that one of the advantages of the people of Israel is that they had the (plural) "covenants of the promise" (Rom 9:4; Eph 2:12).

A new covenant prophesied

However, something was seriously wrong with the Israelite covenant. The people did not have the heart to obey, and God knew it (Deut 31:16-21, 27-29). Unlike Abraham, they did not believe and were not faithful (Heb. 3:19). The fault was with the people (Heb. 8:7-8).

The Sinaitic covenant had regulations for worship, but it could not transform the heart or the conscience (Heb. 9:9), and yet that is what people really need. The priests had to serve continually, but the high priest could approach God's throne only once a year. This indicated that the sacrificial rituals were not effective (Heb. 9:7-9; 10:1-3). The people's minds were dull; they could not understand (Matt 13:14-15; 19:8; 2 Cor 4:4), so they remained in the slavery of sin.

Therefore, God predicted a new covenant. He hinted at it even in the old — he said that, after his people had been sent into captivity because they had broken the covenant, he would regather them and "circumcise your hearts" (Deut 4:25-31; 30:4-10).

The prophets predicted a *new* covenant between God and humans — a new basis of relationship. There would be no need for this new covenant, of course, unless the old were deficient.

In a messianic prophecy fulfilled by Jesus Christ, Isaiah noted that God would make the Servant "to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6; 42:7 is similar to 61:1, which is quoted in Luke 4:18). The Servant himself would be the covenant — *he* would be the basis of the relationship for both Jews and Gentiles. This was fulfilled in Jesus, for he shed his blood, and it is only through him that we may enter God's holy nation. Mal 3:1 predicted that the Lord would be the messenger of the new covenant.

Isaiah again predicted that God would make the Servant to be a covenant for the people in the day of salvation (Isa. 49:8). Just as God had sworn to Noah that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood, he will never remove this "covenant of peace" (54:9-10). "Come to me, all you who are thirsty," God calls (55:1), a scripture fulfilled in Jesus Christ (John 7:37). "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you" (Isa. 55:3).

"The Redeemer will come to Zion," Isa. 59:20 prophesies, "to those in Jacob who repent of their sins." God will make a covenant with these repentant people. His Spirit will be upon them, and his words will remain in them (59:21). They will keep the covenant because they will be changed on the inside.

Isaiah 61 was also fulfilled by Jesus. God's Spirit was upon him, so he preached good news, freedom and comfort (61:1-2; Luke 4:18-21). Isaiah predicted a nation of priests (61:6) who will receive a great inheritance (61:7). God will "make an everlasting covenant with them" (61:8).

We are familiar with Jer. 31:31-33, since it is quoted in Hebrews. Jeremiah predicted a new covenant, which the people will not break, because God's law will be in their minds and hearts. All the people will know the Lord, their sins will be forgiven (31:34), and God will never reject the people (31:35-37).

In other prophecies of regathering, Jeremiah predicted an everlasting covenant (32:40), in which the people will never turn away from fearing God (32:38-40; 50:5).

Ezekiel also foresaw that God would remember the covenant and regather the people; he will then "establish an everlasting covenant with you." He will make atonement for the people, and they will be repentant (Eze. 16:60-62). After gathering them, he will make "a covenant of peace" with them, an everlasting covenant (34:25; 36:27; 37:26). Hosea 2:18 describes a similar covenant.

All these prophets predicted a new covenant, a new basis of relationship with God. This covenant will repair the defective hearts of the people, and will therefore not need to be replaced. It will be an everlasting covenant of peace, a covenant of reconciliation.

Jesus and the new covenant

At the Last Supper, Jesus proclaimed that the wine-cup represented his own blood, which would be the blood of the new covenant (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Heb. 10:29). The cup represented the "new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor

11:25). Just as the Sinaitic covenant was sealed with blood, so also the new covenant was ratified when Jesus' blood was poured out on the cross. We renew that covenant and reaffirm our commitment to it when we drink the wine and eat the bread, remembering the Lord's death until he returns. The Lord's Supper is a visible and tangible reminder of the covenant. But the wine is not sprinkled on the surface of the people -- it is swallowed. The new covenant affects our innermost being.

The new covenant is superior to the old, for it has been founded on better promises (Heb. 8:6). The old covenant could never make anyone perfect; no one could meet its righteous demands. It has now become "obsolete" (8:13); its laws are "set aside"⁵ (7:18; 10:9) -- replaced by a better hope, better promises and an effective transformation of the heart, a transformation that begins with faith.

Jesus Christ is the Messenger and Mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 8:6; 12:24). He is also the sacrifice -- he himself *is* the new covenant. His teachings are the requirements of the covenant. Faith is required for participation in it. The Holy Spirit is given to transform the heart, and eternal life is the promised inheritance. It is an eternal covenant (13:20), guaranteed by Jesus (7:22). His blood has made us perfect, and he is making us holy (10:10, 14).

The new covenant has phenomenal promises, and all who believe them are counted as righteous. They are considered as faithful to the terms of the covenant. Their allegiance (loyalty and obedience) is given to Jesus Christ.

Our relationship with God is based on the new covenant. God takes away our sins (Rom 11:27). Jesus "died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Heb. 9:15). God's Spirit gives us life (2 Cor 3:6). He puts the terms of the covenant within our hearts and minds so we can be faithful to him (Heb. 8:7-10; 10:16). We may therefore "receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15).

Terms of the new covenant

We now come to the most important part of this paper. The new covenant has been made, and the old covenant is obsolete (Heb. 8:13). What then are the terms of the new covenant? Is it simply faith and Spirit added to the old rules? No. Some of the old rules are obsolete.

The book of Hebrews explains that the sacrifices, for example, are done away. Hebrews does not say that the sacrifices are obsolete because they were later additions to the covenant. Rather, it is the Sinaitic covenant itself that is obsolete.

There has been a change of the law (Heb. 7:12). Levites administered the old covenant; Christian ministers administer the new covenant, not the old.

When we compare the new covenant with the old, we see both similarities and differences. Some laws of the old covenant are continued into the new. The Tenth Commandment, for example, is quoted in the New Testament. As another example, we should still obey Ex 22:22: "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan." Even though this commandment is not quoted in the New Testament, the principle is still valid.

Other laws are transformed in the way we apply them. Take Ex 22:19, for example: "Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death." The prohibition is valid, but the church does not enforce the punishment. Today, we would put such a person out of our fellowship until repentance, instead of killing the offender. Part of the law is valid, and part is not.

Some laws are simply discontinued, such as Ex 20:24: "Make an altar of earth for me." And Ex 22:29-30: "You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep." The promises of the old covenant are also discontinued – Christians do not expect God to drive the Canaanites out of the land.

The old covenant was a package of laws and promises between God and his people. That package is now obsolete. Although some laws in the old covenant continue to be valid, others have ceased to be valid. We cannot assume that any particular law is valid simply on the basis of it being commanded in the old covenant.

This principle is taught in Gal 3:17: "The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise." Paul is not singling out ritualistic laws. He is talking about the entire package of laws that was given four centuries after Abraham. The Sinaitic laws cannot do away with the promises God gave to Abraham.

In other words, once a promise has been given, conditions cannot be added (3:15). God knew in advance that the Israelites could not obey the covenant he gave them, and he did not use their disobedience to abandon the promises he had given to Abraham. The old covenant was an addition, given for a temporary purpose. It is now expired, no longer in effect.

The Galatian Christians had received the Holy Spirit by believing the gospel (3:2, 5). By believing, they became children of Abraham (3:7, 29) and partakers of his blessing (3:9, 14). The Galatian believers had the same covenant with God that

Abraham did, and so do Christians today. Paul is explaining that our inheritance depends on promise (3:18), not on the law of Moses. We are children of God by faith, not by law (3:26).

In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise, just as Abraham's was. We are justified by faith and saved by promise -- by grace. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham, nor can those laws change the promise given to us, since we are Abraham's children by faith. God gave his oath to Abraham, and he cannot break his promise by introducing new requirements (3:15). The promise still stands.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, cannot change the original promise, which was given on the basis of faith. Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was uncircumcised (Rom 4:9-11). The promise in Gen. 15 was given without conditions. Abraham is therefore the father of all who have faith, whether they are circumcised or not, and all who have faith can be heirs of the original promise (Rom 4:16). Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is now a matter of the heart (Rom 2:29). Obedience should be in our hearts.

However, no one obeys perfectly. Everyone breaks the law. Law cannot give life (Gal 3:21, 10-12). It was never meant to be a means of salvation. All it can do is condemn us. So what was its purpose? It was added because of transgressions and was to be in force only until Christ came (3:19). It held us prisoners (3:23). Why? "The law was put in charge *to lead us to Christ* that we might be justified by faith" (3:24). The law helps us see what sin is, our need for forgiveness, our need for grace, our need for a Savior, and our need for faith.

"Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (3:25). The law -- meaning the covenant added 430 years after Abraham -- was temporary, added until the coming of the "Seed" the promise referred to -- Christ (3:19). The old covenant was a temporary addition, and it is now obsolete.

By establishing the new covenant, Jesus set aside the first covenant (Heb. 10:9). He did away with many laws, but he also reaffirmed many laws and stressed that obedience should begin in the heart. He also added commands not found in the old covenant at all. The new covenant has many laws of its own.

Faith in Christ means allegiance to him. Faith produces obedience to the laws of the new covenant. All that the Lord has said, we should obey. We look to Jesus' teachings, and the teachings of his inspired apostles, to see the way that Christian faith should work in our lives. Since we always fall short of these New

Testament commands, however, they continue to show us our need for salvation by grace through faith in our Savior.

Righteousness by faith

No one can be declared righteous by observing the law (Rom 3:20). The law cannot give eternal life (Gal 3:21). But the gospel reveals a way in which we can be declared righteous -- a way that was predicted by the Law and the Prophets (Rom 3:21; Acts 10:43). "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Rom 3:22). We can be "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:24).

God gave his unique Son as a sacrifice of atonement so that God can, according to his perfect justice, declare believers justified – righteous (3:25-26). No one can boast about observing the law, since the only way anyone can be justified is "by faith apart from observing the law" (3:28). We are accounted as righteous on the basis of faith, and we are given salvation by grace. If we don't believe that salvation is a gift, then it won't be given to us. If we want to be judged by our works, we will be found guilty. But if we believe that salvation comes only by grace, God forgives our sins because Jesus died for us; it is because of his one great sacrifice that God can forgive all our sins. We are counted as acceptable to God if we have faith in Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:1-2).

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (8:1-4).

Since the law could not transform us and could not give us eternal life, God did what the law could not do. He did it by sending his Son as a sacrifice on our behalf. Through faith, through Jesus Christ, we can be declared righteous – and we are led by the Holy Spirit and changed in the heart. As we remain in Christ Jesus through faith in him, we are counted among the righteous, not among the condemned.

Christians today have a new relationship with God -- a covenant based on faith, a faith that is willing to obey God. But we do not obey according to the old letter or the old covenant, but according to the new, according to the Spirit (2 Cor 3:6). We are ministers of a new covenant, servants of God based on new terms of relationship. The old covenant, with laws that humans were unable to keep, brought condemnation and death. But the glorious new covenant brings life and righteousness (3:7-9). The law brings condemnation; the ministry of the Spirit brings justification and righteousness (3:8-9). In this passage, Paul is emphasizing the differences between the old covenant and the new.

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (3:17). We are forgiven and freed from old covenant regulations, and we now serve Christ by obeying the precepts of the new covenant. That is the ministry Paul was committed to -- preaching the gospel of the glory of Christ (4:1-5). With assurance of salvation, Paul was zealous to preach the gospel (4:13-18).

In Gal 4:21-25, Paul drew an allegory based on Abraham's two sons. Hagar, the slave woman, represented the covenant made at Sinai, with its physical center in Jerusalem. Children of this covenant are slaves, under the law. In contrast, Sarah represents the new covenant, from above, because her child was the product of promise.

We are children of promise (4:28), and we are free (4:26, 31). Christ has set us free, and we are not to be enslaved by the yoke of the old covenant (5:1), not even by the circumcision that came before that covenant (5:2).⁶ But our freedom is not freedom for sin -- it is for service (5:13). We become slaves of righteousness, exhorted to be transformed in our innermost being, exhorted to conform to the perfection of Jesus Christ, exhorted to abide by New Testament commands.

Paul makes a contrast between freedom in Christ and "the whole law" (5:1-3). The whole Mosaic law, as a package regulating a people's relationship with God, is obsolete. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (5:6). We are declared righteous by faith apart from the works of the law. Although faith is accompanied by works (Rom 1:5; 6:17; 12:6-21; James 2:14-17), it is the faith and not the works that is the basis of our justification and the basis of our relationship with God -- the basis of the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

Old and new in Hebrews

The book of Hebrews explains more about the old covenant and the new. Jesus is our eternal High Priest, but he is not a priest according to the old covenant, since he is not a Levite. But the priesthood of physical rites had been given to Levi as an everlasting covenant! So the change in priesthood implies the end of the old

covenant and a change in the nature of sacrifices (Heb. 7:12-14). The old no longer applies; the Israelites had been so consistently disobedient, even to point of crucifying the Son of God, that the agreement was replaced with a new covenant.

The former regulation, the old covenant with its Levitical assignments, was "set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (7:18-19). The new covenant has better promises, and by it we are reconciled to God by the death of his Son. We have guaranteed access to God through our High Priest. Because Jesus lives forever, he is able to save us all (7:24-25).

We needed grace and salvation, and Jesus Christ meets that need (7:26). The book of Hebrews emphasizes that we have a new High Priest (8:1), and that implies a new covenant. Just as the Levites administered the old covenant, the terms of the old relationship between God and Israel, so also the ascended Jesus administers the terms of the new relationship for all who come to God through him (8:6).

The new covenant's better promises include forgiveness, a cleansing of the conscience, which the old covenant could not do, and an internalization of the relationship between us and God. Each person will know God (8:6-12). There is therefore no longer any need for the old covenant (8:13). Why should we choose slavery when freedom is available?

The new covenant will not be like the old covenant (8:5); the people will be able to meet the conditions of the new covenant. That doesn't mean that they will miraculously become able to obey all the old laws perfectly -- rather, it means new terms of relationship. The external regulations applied only "until the time of the new order" (9:10). The worship rules were temporary. The animal sacrifices and regulations about ceremonial cleanness have been superseded by real forgiveness and cleansed consciences (9:13-14).

Christ set aside the first covenant when he established the second (10:9); the old is obsolete (8:13). There is continuity in that God requires faith and allegiance, but there is discontinuity in regulations, mediation, and spiritual status. Grace is made much more evident.

The blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, is able to cleanse our consciences, so that we may serve God (9:14). We have direct access, and we receive a better inheritance -- eternal life -- which we already possess as a down payment guaranteeing our future. Christ was sacrificed once, bearing our sins. When he returns, he will bring salvation (9:28). He has made us perfect

(10:14). He has declared us righteous. Can we believe these promises of God? If we do, we have the faith of Abraham.

"Therefore, brothers," the writer of Hebrews continues, "since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (10:19-22).

Moreover, our faith-based relationship with God has practical consequences in our relationships with other people: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (10:24-25).

Forgiveness has ethical consequences. Because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, we ought to do something in response. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1).

"You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor 6:20). "Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:57-58).

"It is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident.... So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Cor 5:5-9). "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (5:14-15).

Numerous verses could be added, but 2 Cor 5:15 summarizes it nicely. We are to live for Jesus Christ, to his honor and glory. All our lives ought to be dedicated to his service, because his life was given to serve us. If we have faith, we will obey, and our faith will be counted as righteousness. That's the new covenant, the terms of the new relationship God has with humans through his Son who died for us.

Appendix 1: Human covenants

Jacob and Laban made a covenant with each other, spelling out the terms of their relationship (Gen. 31:44). David and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship (1 Sam 18:3; 20:8, 16; 22:8; 23:18). Abner made a covenant with David, pledging allegiance to King David (2 Sam 3:12-13). Ps 55:20 refers to a covenant between friends; Prov. 2:17 and Mal 2:14 refer to marriage covenants.

Business agreements seem to be the intent of Isa. 33:8, Hosea 10:4 and Gal 3:15. Heb. 9:16-17 refers to what we call a will, which goes into effect only after a person dies.

Job uses the term figuratively, as an agreement with leviathan, or an agreement with nature, or a covenant with one's own eyes not to look lustfully at a girl (Job 5:23; 31:1; 41:4). Isaiah talks about a covenant with death (Isa. 28:15, 18), and the heading of Psalms 60 and 80 refers to a song called "The Lily of the Covenant."

The word *berith* is often used for an agreement between one king and another. Eshcol and Aner were allied with or in covenant with Abraham (Gen. 14:13). Abraham made a treaty (*berith*) with Abimelech (21:27, 32). Abimelech proposed a treaty with Isaac, and they swore an oath to each other (26:26-31). Solomon and Hiram had a treaty (1 Kings 5:12). Asa made a treaty with Ben-Hadad, referring to a treaty their fathers had (15:19; 2 Chron. 16:3). Ben-Hadad later made a treaty with Ahab, making concessions and agreements (1 Kings 20:34). Later, the king of Babylon made a *berith* with a ruler of Jerusalem, putting him under oath (Eze. 17:12-14). But the Jewish ruler broke the treaty, and Ezekiel predicted his punishment (17:15-18).

Covenants can also be made between one nation and another. God warned the Israelites not to make treaties with the Canaanites (Ex 23:32; 34:12, 15; Deut 7:2) -- but the Gibeonites tricked them into doing it (Josh 9:6-16), and God criticized them for it (Judges 2:2). The *berith* included mutual obligations: The Gibeonites became servants of Israel, and Israel had to protect them from other Canaanites (Josh 9:19-10:7).

Israel made treaties with other nations (Hosea 12:1). Other nations conspired together or made covenant together against the Israelites, which the psalmist counted as being an alliance against God (Ps 83:4-5). The prophets criticized Tyre for disregarding a treaty of brotherhood (Amos 1:9) and predicted that Edom's covenant partners would turn against them (Obad. 7). Daniel predicted that a future ruler would confirm a covenant with many (Dan 9:27).

Covenants can also be made between a ruler and his people. In one *berith*, Joshua made laws and decrees for his people (Josh 24:25). The people of Jabesh Gilead made a covenant with the leader of the Ammonites, promising to obey him (1

Sam 11:1). The Israelites made a covenant with David, accepting him as their king (2 Sam 3:21; 5:3; 1 Chron. 11:3).

Jehoiada made a covenant with army officers to protect King Joash (2 Kings 11:4), gave Joash a copy of the covenant (11:12) and make a covenant between all the people and the new king (11:17; also in 2 Chron. 23:1-3, 11). Zedekiah made a covenant with the people of Jerusalem (Jer. 34:8-10).

Appendix 2: Various divine covenants

Just as human kings made agreements with other kings or with their nations, God also has made agreements with individuals and with nations.

Hosea 6:7 indicates that God had a covenant with Adam.

Gen. 6:18 and 9:9-17 tells us about God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures. It was a unilateral covenant, for God promised to do his part without any requirement that Noah do his. God established the rainbow as the sign of his covenant, a reminder of his promise not to destroy all life with a flood.

God made a covenant with the Levites that they would receive meat from sacrifices (Num. 18:19). He made a covenant with Phineas, guaranteeing the priesthood for his family (25:12-13). The prophets referred to God's covenant with the priests and Levites (Neh. 13:29; Jer. 33:21; Mal 2:4-5, 8).

God made a covenant with David, guaranteeing the kingship for his family (2 Sam 23:5; 2 Chron. 13:5; 21:7; Ps 89:3, 28, 34). The covenant could be renewed with each descendant who ruled faithfully under God (Ps 132:12). Jeremiah affirmed the permanence of the Davidic covenant (Jer. 33:20-25), but it was temporarily suspended during the captivity, and a psalmist wondered if the covenant had been renounced (Ps 89:39, 49), but he concluded with a statement of faith in God (89:52). The promise is now fulfilled permanently in Jesus Christ, the Son of David who reigns forever.

Zech. 11:10 refers to a "covenant I had with all nations."

Appendix 3: The need to be faithful

Agreements should be kept. God promised to keep his part of the covenant (Lev 26:9); he remembers it (26:45; 1 Chron. 16:15-17; Psalms 105:8; 106:45; 111:5). He

will not break the covenant (Lev 26:44; Judges 2:1) or forget it (Deut 4:31); he promised to keep his "covenant of love" (Deut 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 6:14; Neh. 1:5; 9:32; Dan 9:4). His covenant people are special to him (Ps 50:5). His covenant will endure forever (111:9); he swears it with an oath (105:9-10; Eze. 16:8).

He confirms his covenant by giving blessings (Deut 8:18). He blesses those who obey (Ps 25:10, 14). A psalmist, asking for intervention, asked God to have regard for the covenant (Ps 74:20). Jeremiah asked him to remember the covenant (Jer. 14:21). And he intervened because of the covenant (Zech. 9:11), and in the greatest remembrance, sent redemption through Jesus -- a horn of salvation in the family of David (Luke 1:68-75).

The Israelites were exhorted, "Be careful not to forget the covenant" (Deut 4:23; 2 Kings 17:38). They were told to be monotheistic (2 Kings 17:35). And some Israelites did keep the covenant (Ps 103:18). Levi was commended for guarding the covenant (Deut 33:9); a psalmist claimed to be true to the covenant (Ps 44:17). God commended the eunuchs and the foreigners who held fast to the covenant (Isa. 56:4, 6).

But Israel was for the most part unfaithful, just as God told Moses they would be (Deut 31:16, 20, 27). He pronounced curses on those who would violate the covenant (Lev 26:15, 25; Deut 17:2; 29:21), and the resulting national disasters would be a witness that the people had abandoned the covenant (29:25).

They violated the covenant soon after entering the promised land (Josh 7:11, 15) and were again warned of the curses of rebellion (23:16). But they violated the covenant (Judges 2:20). Apostasy reigned throughout the period of the judges and again in the reign of Saul. David was faithful, and Solomon began that way, but he eventually stopped keeping the covenant (1 Kings 11:11).

The nation became so corrupt that Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The history of the northern kingdom is summarized: "They rejected his decrees and the covenant" (2 Kings 17:15; 18:12; Hosea 6:7; 8:1). So they were sent into captivity; God was faithful to his promised curses.

The Jews were also criticized for unfaithfulness (Psalms 50:16; 78:10, 37; Isa. 24:5; Jer. 11:3, 8, 10). They forsook the covenant, violated it, did not fulfill its terms, broke it, despised it (Jer. 22:9; 34:18; Eze. 16:59; 44:7). So God promised to punish the nation (20:37-38), fulfilling the covenantal curses. But the violations will continue even to the end (Dan 11:30, 32).

God considers the breaking of human agreements as a breaking of his covenant, too (Eze. 17:18-19; Mal 2:10). He requires his people to be faithful to the agreements they make with one another.

Endnotes

¹ As shown in Appendix 1, any agreement could be called a *berith* in Hebrew. Ps 105:9-10 and 1 Chron. 16:15-17 use *berith* as synonymous with *word* and *oath* and *decree*.

² The book of the covenant that Moses read apparently contained everything that the Lord had said (Ex 24:4). This would mean everything the Lord told Moses while he was on the mountain; it may also include the Ten Commandments. The "book of the covenant" found in Josiah's day (2 Chron. 34:30; 2 Kings 23:2) was apparently something else (perhaps the book of Deut), since it had instructions for Passover (2 Kings 23:21), and Ex 20-24 does not.

³ Taken literally, this is false, since their immediate fathers *were* the ones with whom God had made a covenant at Horeb. It may be a Hebrew figure of speech, giving emphasis to the second phrase: God made the covenant at Sinai "not *only* with our fathers, but with all of us" (Today's English Version). Or the "fathers" may mean the patriarchs, indicating that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not have this covenant with God.

⁴ This could be either the covenant made at Sinai or in Moab, since they both occurred as part of the Exodus from Egypt. Although differing in some details, the two covenants were essentially the same, requiring allegiance to the Lord.

⁵ Christ came to fulfill the law, and he said that none of it would disappear until all is fulfilled (Mt 5:17-19). Commandments like circumcision and sacrificial rituals have not disappeared. Nevertheless, they have been set aside and are not required today. These laws are instructive, even though they are no longer in force. The application has been changed. Mt 5:17-19 does not tell us which laws have been changed and which have not.

⁶ Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it does not improve anyone's standing before God. It should not be done as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the issue in Acts 15 and Gal 5:2-3.

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