
The Covenants – 2

At the end of the Old Testament the nation of Israel was under the domination of foreign powers. They had lost the land, the temple, and the presence of God. The return to the land under Nehemiah, Ezra, and others did not lead to the golden age that might have been expected from reading the prophets. Instead, there was humiliation, war, and compromise. The promises of the coming kingdom, so clearly announced by the prophets, were still to be fulfilled.

Between the book of Malachi, written in the time of Nehemiah, and the first book of the New Testament, lies a period of about 400 years. They were years of silence. There was no word from God.

God speaks

And then, out of the silence, God spoke. First He spoke to a priest called Zacharias (Luke 1:5-17).

And many of the children of Israel shall he [John] turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children...; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

—Luke 1:15-17

When Zacharias heard these words he would immediately have recalled the great “comfort” promise of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1-3), as well as the last promises of the Old Testament (Malachi 3:1; 4:5,6; note the reference to the covenant). God was moving again.

When the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), the promises again resonated with the coming of the kingdom of God (v.33; compare Daniel 7:13,14,27). Mary saw them as the fulfilment of God’s promises to Israel (Luke 1:54,55). Zacharias understood them as a remembrance of God’s “holy covenant, the oath that He swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72,73).

John and Jesus: the ministry to Israel

In Luke 3:1,2 are listed the national and religious powers of the day; but the word of God came to a man in the wilderness. (Maybe Luke chuckled as he wrote that!) John’s ministry was to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:17), by bringing thousands of people to repentance.

A short time later, Jesus announced His coming:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.

—Isaiah 62:1,2; Luke 4:16-21

What followed was a national revival – the greatest revival that Israel had ever seen. Jesus Himself testified that John was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 11:11). The whole movement was a fulfilment of Zechariah 13:1,2.

However, the ministry of Jesus was restricted to the people of Israel, as a fulfilment of the promises made to them. See, for example, Matthew 10:5,6; 15:22-27; Romans 15:8.

What of the promise that had been given to Abraham, that through him God would bless *all* the nations of the earth?

The announcement of the new covenant

When Jesus was about to go to the Cross, He said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood" (Luke 22:20). No doubt He had in mind the words of Jeremiah:

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.

—Jeremiah 31:31,32

Ezekiel similarly had promised:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

—Ezekiel 36:25-28

Jesus was announcing in the upper room that the day promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel had come. He was about to make a blood covenant, sealed not with the blood of an animal but with His own blood.

Why the blood?

Under the Mosaic covenant, the high priest entered *once a year* to sprinkle blood on the mercy-seat as an atonement for the sins of the people. The Hebrew word for atonement, *kaphar*, means literally *to cover*. Although sin was covered, it still remained. The high priest then left the holy place until next year. In the new covenant, Christ entered *once* into the "holy places" as our high priest (Hebrews 9:11; 8:1). He offered His own blood as the final sacrifice that did not merely cover, but *put away*, sins (Hebrews 9:25,26). Furthermore, He remains seated there as the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 8:1; 9:15; 12:24).

Apart from being the guarantee of the covenant, Christ's blood was also the sacrifice for sin, the price of redemption. This was what He meant by saying that He would give His life "a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

When did the new covenant begin?

Both logic and Scripture indicate a very specific time when Christ's mediation of the new covenant began.

1. It did *not* begin at the beginning of what we call the New Testament.

It is clearly connected with the *death* of Christ, not His birth. He did not enter into His ministry as a high priest in heaven until after He had shed His blood (Hebrews 9:15).

2. It did *not* come into force on the day of His ascension.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the new covenant in terms of the *Holy Spirit*, just as Ezekiel had done. "God...has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit" (v.6). The new covenant is the ministry of the Spirit (v.8). This is consonant with the teaching of Christ about the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

The conclusion is that *the new covenant was inaugurated when the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost*. Although it is possible that the covenant was made when He ascended, it did not come into actuality, as evidenced by the giving of the Spirit, until ten days later, at Pentecost (see Acts 2:32,33).

The Feast of Pentecost falls 50 days after the Passover in the Jewish calendar (“Pentecost” means *fiftieth*). It is also known as the “Feast of Weeks” (Exodus 34:22), because the 50 days equate to seven weeks.

The Passover lamb was sacrificed on the 14th day of the first month (Exodus 12:6). According to Exodus 19:1, the Israelites arrived in the wilderness of Sinai in the third month—that is, about six weeks after they fled from Egypt. It is quite possible that Moses inaugurated that first covenant, as described in Exodus 24, seven weeks after the Passover, on the day that would afterwards be known as Pentecost. It would be quite typical of God to be exact in the timing of this, just as He was in the timing of the death of Christ at the Passover.

Where was the new covenant ratified?

The new covenant was inaugurated in heaven, at the right hand of God, when Christ received the Spirit from the Father so that He could shed Him abroad on the earth (Acts 2:33).

How is the new covenant administered?

A covenant is often mediated by a person who acts as an intermediary or mediator. The mediator’s role is to intervene between two parties in order to establish a relationship between them.

Moses was the mediator of the old covenant (Galatians 3:19). However, he could not live for ever, so the covenant was administered through a hereditary priesthood that continued the mediatorial work.

Peter said on the day of Pentecost:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

—Acts 2:32-33

Note how v.33 says exactly the same thing as Hebrews 8:1. The Lord Jesus Christ ascended to the throne, sat down, and began to mediate the Holy Spirit to His people. See also 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24. His work as mediator began with the offering of His blood to the Father as a reconciliation for sins. It continues in His continual intercession for us at the throne of God (Hebrews 7:25)—which never ends because He “always lives.”

The Lord Jesus had previously said, “If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). See also John 15:26. The new covenant is the ministration of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6,8), and so He baptizes people in the Holy Spirit. According to John 14:18, it is through the Spirit that the Lord Jesus Himself comes to His people.

How does a person enter into the new covenant?

Evidently a person enters into the new covenant through receiving the Holy Spirit. That was Peter’s final point in his sermon on the day of Pentecost—not salvation, or forgiveness (essential as they are), but the receiving of the Spirit (Acts 2:38). There are multitudes of ways in which a person may receive the Holy Spirit, but without Him a person cannot enter into the blessings of the new covenant.

Who is the new covenant for?

Peter was astounded to see the Holy Spirit poured out on Cornelius and his household (Acts 10). God gave Gentiles the Holy Spirit, “just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (Act 15:8, 9). Unlike the old covenant, the new covenant is open to all peoples of the earth, as Paul says:

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles...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...have*

been brought near by the blood of Christ...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

—Ephesians 2:11-19 (emphasis added)

This is the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. The Gentiles are now partakers of the promises given to Israel (Ephesians 3:1-10). Isaiah had said 700 years before:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations... He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law... "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness...Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."

—Isaiah 42:1-9

Why did God abandon the old covenant?

Hebrews 8:7 says that the second covenant has now *replaced* the first. This may seem an obvious thing to say, but it is of *paramount importance* to us. If we confuse the two covenants—or even worse, if we try to live under the terms of the old one—we shall never be able to live the Christian life.

We should, of course, study that first covenant. However, we should always interpret it in the light of the new covenant, and not the other way round. We should never try to live according to the terms of the old covenant. Some elements of the first covenant are still in force—for example, the moral law encapsulated in the Ten Commandments. But there are many other elements, such as the sacrifices and the priesthood, that are now superseded.

Why did God abandon the first covenant? Part of the answer is in Hebrews 8:7—“For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.” Evidently the covenant was flawed, not because there was anything wrong with it, but because the people could not keep it. In v.8 it says, “finding fault with *them*...” This confirms what the writer said earlier:

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

—Hebrews 7:18,19

This is exactly the kind of failure that Paul describes in Romans 7:7-14. Far from being the expected Christian experience, what he describes is the dilemma of a man who knows the law and tries to keep it—in other words, a man who is trying to live under the first covenant. The problem is not with the law (v.7, 12) but with the sin that dwells within him (v.17, 23). In the next chapter Paul says that “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do” (Romans 8:3).

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul compares the two covenants. He calls the first covenant “the ministry of death” and “the ministry of condemnation”. “The letter kills,” he says. And again in Romans 7:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

—Romans 7:9,10

The old covenant was superseded simply because it did not work. Men without the Holy Spirit could not keep it.

The terms of the new covenant

The new covenant has terms and obligations. What are my obligations? And what will God do?

My part is certainly *not* to attempt to keep a law. The new covenant will be “*not* like the old one” (Hebrews 8:9). Instead, I must “draw near to God through [Christ]” (Hebrews 7:25). I must “come boldly to the throne of grace” (4:16). I must trust in what He has done for me. I must let Jesus Christ be my “wisdom and...righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

In other words, my obligation is to believe, receive, and rest in what Christ has done for me.

So what will God do? The answer to this question is given in detail in Hebrews 8:10-13. The rest of this section is an examination of this passage, taking the promises in reverse order.

For this is the covenant...I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.

—Hebrews 8:10-13 (quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34)

1. Forgiveness of sins

God does not forget; He refuses to remember. John says, “He is faithful and just to forgive” (1 John 1:9), because Christ has already borne the penalty of sin. If God refuses to remember my sins, so must I.

This promise applies not only to me but also to all others who are partakers in the covenant. Since God will not remember their sins as well, neither must I remember them. Hence we are to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave [us]” (Ephesians 4:32).

2. The knowledge of God

We shall know Him. Psalm 103:7 says, “He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.” We are to know His ways, not only His acts. This knowledge of God is not knowledge of the Bible. It is the intuitive knowledge that a child has of its father. John says:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning...I write to you, children, because you know the Father.

—1 John 2:12-14

The knowledge of the little children is not sophisticated or schooled; it is instinctive. It is not yet a developed knowledge such as the fathers have; it is the instinctive knowledge of God which is the essential starting point for real spiritual growth. Paul confirms this in his words in Romans and Galatians about the inward witness of the Spirit, who cries, “Abba, Father!” (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). It is the Holy Spirit who takes the things of God and shows them to us (1 Corinthians 2:10-13).

3. No need to be taught

“They shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord.’” John confirms this bold statement:

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge [some versions read ‘and you know all things’]...But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything—and is true and is no lie, just as it has taught you—abide in him.

—1 John 2:20,27

The terms “anointing” and “the Holy One” again point to the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus said, “he will teach you all things,” “he will guide you into all the truth” (John 14:26; 16:13). Of course, John is not against the ministry of teachers, for God appoints teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11). He is merely putting that ministry in its proper place. The proper ministry of a teacher is to confirm and to explain to people what they already know by the Spirit—assuming, of course, that the teachers have received the

Spirit themselves. A teacher operating in the power of the Spirit will not draw people to himself but to the Lord.

The person taught, on the other hand, must not be passive (that way lies retarded growth), but must be actively involved in the teaching process, comparing what the teacher says with what the Spirit says, and exercising his spiritual senses (Hebrews 5:14).

John is also not advocating the neglect of the Scriptures, for the Spirit who teaches us inwardly is the same Spirit who “carried along” those men of God to write the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:21). Anyone who claims to be “led by the Spirit” in contradiction of Scripture is deceived. On the contrary, the person who knows the inward voice of the Spirit will hear the echo of confirmation in his heart as the Scripture is read or expounded.

4. Involved with God

God says, “They will be my people, and I will be their God.” There will be a dimension of our lives which is only explicable in terms of God. This promise is repeated many times in Scripture. See Genesis 17:8; Jeremiah 24:7; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 37:23,27; Zechariah 8:8; 2 Corinthians 6:16, and so on.

The Old Testament nations viewed wars as contests between their respective gods. We see that contest in the plagues of Egypt, where the Egyptian magicians attempted to duplicate the acts of God. We see it also in the words of the Assyrian ambassador as he threatens the people of Judah. He suggests to the Israelites that there is no point in resisting because his god is better than theirs:

Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, “The Lord will deliver us.” Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?

—Isaiah 36:18-20

As it turned out, he was mistaken!

But it is not only a question of battles, whether physical or spiritual. In this promise the Lord commits Himself to us. We become involved with Him, and He does things in our daily experience. Moreover, in doing so He risks the reputation of His holy Name. He does not expect His children to live some kind of sub-standard life (spiritually speaking) that brings dishonour to Him. What a change must take place in human hearts if God is not to be put to shame by doing this! Compare John 2:23-25.

5. Inwardly led

“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.” In the old covenant the law was written on tablets of stones. It was an external law that anyone could read.

In the new covenant the law is no longer external but is written on human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3). As in everything else about the new covenant, it is the Holy Spirit who does the work.

This confirms what Jesus said: “He will teach you all things” (John 14:26). The Spirit tells us when we are right and when we are wrong. He tells us not to do certain things, and to do certain things. He speaks in the quiet voice of conscience, suiting His educational curriculum to the needs of each individual, warning and encouraging, transforming us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

On our part, obedience to His teaching springs not from fear but from love; not from an outward demand but from an inner compulsion. The commands become promises—“you shall not commit adultery.” His commandments are no longer burdensome (1 John 5:3). Being thus led by the Spirit, we are no longer under the law (Galatians 5:18).

This is an astounding change from the old covenant. We find it hard to grasp because human nature persists in trying to erect external standards for behaviour (and applying them to others!).

The Hebrews writer is quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34. He could just as easily have quoted from Ezekiel 36:26,27:

*And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and [I will] **cause** you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

God promises to *cause us* to walk in His statutes. It is an inward compulsion brought about by the working of the Spirit in the heart.

Summary

Hebrews 8 declares that the old covenant has been superseded by the new. Although study of the old covenant is certainly profitable, we should always keep it clear that it is not *our* covenant. We need to understand the terms on which we can now enter into the new covenant through Jesus Christ.

The Hebrews were evidently in danger of reverting to the old way—that is why this “word of exhortation” was written to them (Hebrews 13:22). The writer’s exposition of the new covenant makes it clear that we can never go back if we want to know God. We must receive the Spirit, and respond to His teaching, and press on under His leading, for He will never lead us astray.