

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

The salvation plan of God centers primarily on the establishing of certain covenants in the Word of God through which God promises to impart His grace to His people. In the Old Testament, a covenant described **an official and legal agreement between two parties**. Essentially, there are mainly 2 kinds of covenants that interest us: one is like a contract – it is **conditional**; and the other one is more like a promise – it is **unconditional**; both of which were legally binding.

When the contract was made, each side had to make good on his part or the covenant was null and void, and the covenant breaker was liable to the other party. Typically the consequences of failing to uphold the covenant were clearly outlined in the covenant itself, so that both parties knew what they were getting into.

The Old Testament had a very significant way to enforce covenants. A covenant was sealed by making a sacrifice of a calf (sometimes more animals) that was cut in two and laid on the ground in such a way that is left a path in the middle. The two covenant makers would pass through, swearing that if one broke his part in keeping the covenant, the other had the right to do to him what they did to the sacrifices (**Genesis 15:9-17; Jeremiah 34:18,19**).

In the case of the covenant of promise (2nd), the responsibility to fulfill the covenant rests with only one party, the covenant maker. This unconditional promise meant that what was pledged would come to pass – the character of the covenant maker guaranteed it. This obligation was just as real as the conditional covenant, but in this case, nothing in the other person could thwart the fulfillment of the promise.

The Scripture specifically mentions six covenants by name: the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Priestly, Davidic, and New Covenants. *This is not to be confused with covenant theology which builds an entire system of interpretation and theology based on three covenants nowhere mentioned in Scripture:*

1. The Covenant of Redemption – a covenant made in eternity past between the members of the Trinity as to their role in salvation, to redeem lost sinners through the death of Christ. ***The Bible does not call this a covenant; it calls it election.***
2. The Covenant of Works – a covenant made between God and Adam, who is said to be the representative head over the entire human race, wherein God promises life for perfect obedience and death for disobedience. ***The Bible does not mention this as a covenant, though the choice of Adam's sin did plunge the human race into a disobedient state and eternal judgment.***
3. The Covenant of Grace – a covenant made between God and man which promises salvation to all who trust Christ as Savior by faith alone – the elect. Thus the covenantal theologian sees no difference between the church and Israel, since all elect under the Covenant of Grace. ***The Bible does teach the salvation of the elect, whether they are in the Old Testament or New Testament, but this is nowhere spoken of as a covenant.***

As noted above, there are some semblances of truth sprinkled into each of these “covenants” but they are never spoken of as covenants by God in Scripture. In contrast,

covenant theologians (many of whom I highly respect as men of God, nevertheless) essentially ignore the Biblical Covenants clearly taught. This article is designed to provide a very general overview to the understanding of the meaning, nature, and fulfillment of the **Biblical** covenants (*It is important to note that in the covenants, even in the covenants of promise, faith was still required to receive the blessings of the covenant. If a person did not believe, he was personally excluded from those blessings, but that in no way nullified the promise of God to His people – it merely identified who His people truly were*).

- **Noahic Covenant** – the promise that God made to Noah that He would never again destroy the world with a flood. This was a covenant of promise offered in the form of common grace to all men. The sign was a rainbow (see **Genesis 6:1-13, 17-18; 7:17-8:2, 8-17**). This covenant will be fulfilled finally when the Lord comes to judge the world, not with water, but with fire (**2 Peter 3:3-13**).
- **Abrahamic Covenant** – this is by far the most significant Old Testament covenant of promise that God made to Abraham, namely that he would 1) be blessed and be a blessing, 2) that he would have a great name, 3) his seed would make him the father of many nations, and 4) he and his descendents would have an everlasting possession of the land of Canaan. The sign of the covenant was circumcision (see **Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-11**). This covenant was made with Israel, a promise that also would extend to include all nations of the earth into its blessing, that is, to all who believe (as did Abraham) in Christ, the one seed (a genuine physical descendent of Abraham – cf. **Galatians 3:6-29**). It will be fulfilled when Israel permanently dwells in her Promised Land along with other nations who have been included by faith in Christ, as they together share the glory of salvation.
- **Mosaic Covenant** – a contract (the only bi-lateral conditional covenant) between God and the people of Israel that they would be blessed if they completely, in every way obeyed God's Law given at Mount Sinai. The sign was the Sabbath. This covenant was designed to reveal what men did not see about themselves – they were renegade sinners who had nothing with which to commend themselves to God. They did not understand that righteousness came from faith and so God graciously decided to help them see their sin, which would point to the need for a Savior, which God provided for them in the Person of Jesus Christ, to whom all the sacrificial requirements pointed in the Mosaic system (see **Exodus 19:1-11, 18-20; 20:1-17; 24:3-8; 31:12-18**). This covenant was made obsolete and terminated at the cross of Christ who fulfilled the Law perfectly by His obedience and by His sacrificial death for sinners. The Mosaic Covenant was then replaced by the New Covenant which provided everything the people saw they lacked in the Mosaic Covenant (**Hebrews 8:7-13**). Thus the New Testament believer is no longer under the Old Covenant made with Moses.
- **Priestly Covenant** – this is a less well-known covenant made by God to the Levites, called a “**covenant of peace,**” where the Levitical priesthood was given permanency because of the faithfulness of a man named Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron who

stopped the plague of God's wrath against Israel in their harlotry and idolatry (see **Numbers 25:1-13**). This promise, being separate from the Mosaic Covenant, extends the service of these priests even in the Millennial Kingdom (cf. **1 Chronicles 6:50-53; Ezekiel 44:10, 15; 48:11**), God equating its permanence with the Davidic Covenant (**Jeremiah 33:14-22**). Therefore, this covenant will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom and extend as long as the Covenant of David extends, which is forever (cf. **Ezekiel 37:21-28**).

- **Davidic Covenant** – the promise to King David that his name would be great, he would have rest from his enemies, his physical lineage would remain forever, and his throne would be established forever, as one of his descendants would rule on his throne. Namely Jesus the Messiah, who would reign as King over God's people from Jerusalem forever (see **2 Samuel 7:1-16; Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:7**). This is an amplification of the Abrahamic Covenant, which promised a king that would come from Abraham's loins (**Genesis 17:6**). This covenant is fulfilled when King Jesus reigns over Israel on David's throne in the Millennial Kingdom in earthly Jerusalem as promised (see **Ezekiel 34:20-31; 37:21-28**).
- **New Covenant** – the promise to the nation of Israel that God would provide them with regeneration, forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, full experiential knowledge of the Lord, and certain material blessings like a rebuilt Temple in *the land* promised to Abraham. The sign of this covenant was given by the Lord Jesus Himself and is the Lord's Table celebration of communion (see **Jeremiah 31:31-37; Ezekiel 36:22-38**). This is an amplification of the "blessing" promised to Abraham, in which it will be fully and finally fulfilled with Israel when she is permanently fixed in her land, inheriting the original promises made to Abraham, David, the Levites, along with all those non-Jews who trusted in Christ, who are then made one people of God.

NOTE: The fulfillment of these covenants of promise (all the above except the Mosaic Covenant, being a bi-lateral contract) must be realized in every specific as they were promised. Paul makes the point in **Galatians 3:15**, speaking about covenants, that once a covenant is sealed, it cannot be altered in any way. No conditions may be added and it cannot be set aside, in part or in whole. Therefore, if God makes the promise to Israel, it will be fulfilled to Israel. If He promises a specific land, with details and dimensions, it will be just as He said. If He promises a King on that land over His people who believe, it will be just as He said. If the descendants of Phinehas are promised a priestly function alongside the permanent kingdom of David, then they will be His special priests, just as He pledged. The glory of the mystery in the church is that God included the Gentiles also, who once were "**strangers to the covenants of promise**" (**Ephesians 2:12**), and through Christ has made them partakers of these promises given to Israel, because of the work of Christ. The church in no way replaces Israel as the recipient of the promises. Israel will receive what is promised just as God said, though the church (made of Jew and Gentile) is currently receiving some of the benefits of the Abrahamic and New Covenant promises in order to make Israel jealous, until the day when she will repent of her apostasy and return to Christ (cf. **Romans 11**).