

## “Covenant: New!”

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 • Ephesians 2:1-10 • John 3:14-21

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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Over the past few weeks we have looked at three great covenants in the Bible. A covenant is a solemn or binding promise between two parties, usually formal in nature, typically in writing, and often affirmed with some kind of visible sign or seal. The first great covenant was with Noah: God promised Noah that God would never again destroy the earth with a flood. God gave Noah seven instructions that God wanted humanity to follow, but God’s promise would stand regardless of whether people followed those instructions. God sealed that covenant with a sign: the rainbow, a reminder of God’s sacred promise. The second great covenant was with Abraham: God chose Abraham and his offspring out of all the families of the earth to receive special blessings: many descendants, “nations” and “kings” among Abraham’s offspring, the land of Canaan as a “perpetual holding,” and the spiritual promise to be their God. God asked one thing of Abraham: that he and all his male offspring be circumcised, as a reminder to Jewish boys and their moms, and Jewish men and their wives, that they are a special people, uniquely chosen by God. That second covenant, like the first, was unconditional; nothing Abraham or his offspring could do would jeopardize it. The third great covenant was with Moses: God gave Moses a large set of laws and demanded that the people of Israel follow them. Ten very important laws were inscribed on stone tablets and kept in a special chest, the ark of the covenant, but another 603 laws were also important. This covenant was conditional. *If* the people obeyed, *then* they would receive many blessings from God; if they disobeyed, disaster would result. God would uphold God’s part of the bargain *if and only if* Israel upheld theirs. The people of Israel could even lose the *land* that God had promised to give them, if they disobeyed. As time went on, that is precisely what happened; the people of Israel disobeyed time after time, with the result that the northern kingdom of Israel was invaded and destroyed by the Assyrian Empire, and the southern kingdom of Judah was invaded and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. The people of Israel were forcibly removed from the land God had given them.

Each of those covenants dramatically *changed* the relationship between God and God’s people. Before the first covenant, God was willing to destroy almost all of humanity; after that covenant, we can rest assured that God will *never* do that again. Before the second covenant, all the people of earth were viewed equally by God; after that covenant, one particular group was now God’s “chosen” people. Before the third covenant, that “chosen” people only had a few rules to live by; after that covenant, they were burdened with the weight of *many* laws, and the fear of retribution if they did not observe them.

Some interpreters say there is a *fourth* great covenant in the Old Testament, a covenant with David, the first great king of Israel. God gives some very important promises to David; in 2 Samuel 7, God tells him: “I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place and be

disturbed no more, and evildoers shall afflict them no more.... The Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.... I will not take my steadfast love from him.... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” These promises are extremely important; they show God’s intent to uphold the kingdom of David *forever*. But the word “covenant” is not used here, and these promises do not fundamentally change the people’s relationship with God, the way the previous three covenants did. There is also the very real fact that David’s royal dynasty came to a bitter end. Twenty kings came after David, his direct descendants. The last, Zedekiah, tried to flee from the invading Babylonian army. But he was captured, he was forced to watch his sons be executed, then he was blinded, chained, and imprisoned in Babylon for the remainder of his days. David’s royal dynasty was wiped out. God had promised David a kingdom that would last “forever,” but “forever” turned out to be about 415 years. So ... what does that mean about God’s promise of an everlasting kingdom? Faithful Jews carefully studied their scriptures and came to believe that the promise *still endured*. Despite the devastation they had suffered, a day would come when circumstances would change, and a descendant of David would once again reign as king, and their people would live in safety. Thus was born the hope of a *Messiah* – a son of David who would both save and rule the chosen people of God.

You may be aware of a well-known symbol for the Jewish people, called the *star of David*. The six-pointed star has been used for many centuries in Jewish art and architecture, and a very old Jewish legend says that Solomon, the son of David, bore this emblem on his signet ring. But it’s called the “star of *David*” because God promised an everlasting kingdom *to David*. It is a symbol of their national *hope*.

There is one more great covenant in the Bible, one more *fundamental change* in the relationship between God and God’s people. Around the time of the Babylonian invasion, God told the prophet Jeremiah: “The days are surely coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke.... This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel...: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.... They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest ... for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” A “new covenant.” Not written on stone tablets, like the Ten Commandments, but a covenant *inscribed on human hearts*. God promises a future in which *written laws won’t be needed*. People will *know God*, and *do God’s will*. This is the fundamental issue; we have been flawed from the very beginning. Human sin resulted in the flood; human sin resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Davidic monarchy; human sin necessitated the instructions God gave to Noah, and the laws God gave to Moses. From the very beginning, we have been *very bad* at knowing and doing God’s will. Now, God says, *that is going to change*. A day is coming when we won’t need rules. We’ll have something *better* than rules.

About two thousand years ago there lived a man, a Jewish man, who at birth was given the name *Yeshua*, which means, “God saves.” Like everyone on this earth, he was an inheritor of the covenant God had made with *Noah*. As a Jew, he inherited the covenant with *Abraham*, so he was circumcised when he was eight days old; and he inherited the covenant with *Moses*, so he was taught to follow the Jewish Law. His adoptive father, Joseph, was a direct descendant of *David*. This man Yeshua inherited *all* the

covenants and *all* the promises. He was a *son of Noah*, a *son of Abraham*, and a *son of David*. He was also – though most people didn’t realize it – the *Son of God*, and the long-hoped-for *Messiah* of God.

But he did not observe the Law of Moses the way it was being taught by the rabbis of his day. He knew the Law, and he knew it *well*; he could debate its finer points with the best of them. But he fundamentally disagreed with how the Jewish Law was being taught and applied, and how the people of God had placed so much emphasis on trivial matters that they were neglecting the weightier matters of *justice, mercy, and faith*. He became *extremely* controversial. Many people *loved* him. Many others felt *threatened* by him. Some of the more astute Jewish leaders, like Nicodemus, recognized that there was something *immensely of God* about him. Many other leaders just wanted him *silenced ... or dead*.

There came a night when he knew his time had come. It was the annual Jewish celebration of Passover. This man gathered with his chosen followers to share the Passover meal. He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Then he took a cup of wine, blessed it, and passed it around, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is” – pay attention here! – “the new *covenant* sealed in my blood.” Notice his use of the phrase “new covenant.” This man deliberately used a phrase that was *six hundred years old* to describe what he was doing. A *new covenant*, sealed in his blood. The covenant with Moses had also been sealed in blood; Moses had taken blood from sacrificial oxen and dashed it on the people. Now, a *different* blood would be used, the very next day, when this man’s broken body was impaled on a wooden cross, his blood dripping from open wounds, as he allowed himself to be sacrificed. With that sacrifice, our sins – yours and mine – are forgiven. *All* of them. The fundamental problem of human sin was being resolved. The new covenant that Jeremiah had foreseen was becoming a reality. This man *embodied* a new covenant. A new covenant that would not require circumcision, or the observance of the Jewish Law, but would instead be written on our hearts. We who follow Jesus take our instruction from him. He is the one, and the *only* one, we are to follow. That’s what it means to call him *Lord*.

This new covenant, like the previous covenants, came with some special *signs*. Not a rainbow, not circumcision, not stone tablets or an ark to store them in. This covenant has *three new signs*. I just talked about two of them. *The bread and the cup*, which constantly remind us of Jesus offering his body and blood to cleanse us from our sins. The third, and final, symbol is *water*. The water of baptism. The water we pass through when we become part of this covenant family. God had promised Abraham: “in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed.” This is how we receive that blessing, by becoming part of God’s covenant family. Baptism is our rite of passage, our *initiation*. We’re born as inheritors of the first covenant, the covenant with Noah; we *become* inheritors of New Covenant, the covenant of Jesus, in the waters of baptism. Three signs: bread, cup, and water. Gifts of God, for the people of God.

One final thing. If you go back to the traditional English version of the Bible, the King James, you won’t find the words “new covenant” on the lips of Jesus at the Last Supper. In that translation, he doesn’t say, “This cup is the *new covenant* sealed in my blood.” He says, “This cup is the *new testament* sealed in my blood.” We call the 27 books in the latter part of the Bible the “New Testament,” but, in truth, we could call them the *New Covenant*. The words mean pretty much the same thing. The Bible consists of the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*, but what that *really means* is that there’s an *Old Covenant*, which doesn’t apply to us, and a *New Covenant*, written on our hearts, thanks to Jesus Christ.

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