

## Sunday 10 September 2006 Sermon - King's Centre Christian Church, Sheffield, UK

### COVENANT SERIES – Week 1, Introduction to the Covenant

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#### Introduction

We are starting new series this Autumn on Covenant. Marjorie and I are personally very excited about it – we've been affected deeply as we've done the preparation for it .

I guarantee you, that if you take on board the reality of what it means to be covenant people, in covenant with God Almighty and his son Jesus

- I guarantee that your Christian walk will be deeply impacted
- You will see things we do as churches and Christians in a new light
- You will find renewed meaning and drive to live life as sold-out disciples of Jesus
- whatever stage you are at as a follower of Jesus – young believer, just investigating or been a disciple for 50 yrs
- I guarantee it because this theme of covenant, which weaves itself throughout the pages of scripture Old and New, is so significant, so deep to the faith we hold to, that you can't help being affected by it, noticing it everywhere, touched again by the awesomeness of God

We've felt that we should teach this series too, bc the theme of Covenant needs to be central to our understanding of the Christian faith and the bible. Covenant finishes the circle of **Kingdom** teaching we began this time last year. Both themes hold each other together. They are 2 sides of the same coin and they are related. Kingdom is the expression, the outworking, of the new covenant

#### Have you ever wondered:

- How and why it is that the bible says God is faithful and never breaks his promises?
- Why we frequently say the words 'in the name' of Jesus?
- Why Paul use the phrase 'in Christ'?
- Why Jesus use the word 'remember' when he instituted the Lord's Supper
- Why Jesus taught his followers to 'eat of my flesh and drink my blood'
- What some of the symbolism of communion is all about, and why Jesus goes on about being a 'new covenant'?
- How to fight spiritual warfare, and what the armour of God is all about?

**This series will unpack the answers to these and other questions, and shed light on the bible itself.**

We're producing some notes to go alongside the series for small groups to use if they wish – so if you really want to develop your understanding of covenant, its another good reason why Marjorie & I recommend that you join a small group! Also – get the CDs of this series if you miss them – its going to be really significant stuff! And Kingdom CDs/mp3's also available online or via office.

## Why study covenant?

1) **Covenant is a theme of the whole scriptures** – not just taking a passage as a tit-bit. It undergirds the bible.

### *Understand Covenant – and understand the bible!*

- Its woven into the very fabric of the bible, and the way that God reveals himself to humankind through the bible ever since
- If you know, you can find your way through, based on these map co-ordinates, grid references
- Covenant provides a framework for understanding – not just details

### 2) **Understand & engage with today's culture**

- Society is full of fear of commitment, brokenness, families, etc
- We don't understand covenant anymore as a society (they do in Africa, the East etc)
  - That's arguably one of the reasons why society is so fragmented and messed up
- There is still a pressing desire in people to belong – friends, not families, are not society's cornerstone
- So COVENANT = a biblical reference point to how God wants to build community and belonging

## Definition of Covenant

- An agreement between 2 parties
  - To become one. To enter into 'one-ness'
  - Complete unity in relationship

### Modern examples of covenant:

- Marriage
  - Where 2 become 1
  - You promise 'what's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine'. You promise to live life together, as one
- Not many more examples in modern life – its slipped out of usage and understanding

## **Today - Going to look at the covenant which god made with Abram – Genesis 12-17**

## 2 kinds of Covenant

1. Between equal parties
2. Between greater and lesser, stronger and weaker

BIBLE – almost always the 2<sup>nd</sup> kind of COV – greater/lesser

- Usually between God and people

### Greater & Lesser type in ancient societies:

- The Stronger party **Confers** the right to weaker party, to come into a relationship of **equality**

### What would happen?

- 2 tribes come together (perhaps thru expediency – to avoid damaging wars)
- They come together to make an agreement, a solemn promise, a covenant that in future they will be ONE – a new tribe, no longer with 2 separate identities, but sharing the same identity and the same possessions.

### *Historically, the symbolic ceremony of covenant making was like this:*

- The tribal chief represents his whole people. They would stand at opposing sides to each other.
- Each tribe would bring certain animals (heifer, goat, ram – 3 years old – ie. in the prime of their life, dove & pigeon)
  - expensive, costly, valuable items (like cars, houses, jewellery, pension plans, etc) – so they represented their wealth.
- They would butcher the animals – cut them in half straight down the middle
- Lay pieces open with entrails in-between. Creating a corridor of blood.
- The chiefs would walk thru and cross over sides
- No way of avoid the blood and guts on your clothes!

This symbolised that the two sides, the two tribe with separate identities and possessions, have now become one. They've swapped sides, they've walked through costly sacrifices, they've shown each other that they mean business.

### Next step is the Ratification of the deal

- The covenant is symbolised, then it was *ratified*
- Gifts given to the chiefs from (what used to be) the other tribe
  - Eg. 1 tribe of cattle herders give cows to the other tribe of sheep rearers & vice versa
  - Everything that I have is now yours, and I give you a portion of what was mine before the deal – so that you know I am real about this relationship
  - Usually give 10% to each other
- Now its all shared wealth, because they are all one
- Sometimes the tribes would also share people – so they might marry a man & woman together across the tribes
- They take on each others enemies (and friends) as tribes
- Eat together the cooked meat, and share bread and drink wine together as a group solemnly
- Finally, 2 chiefs CUT a mark (wrist/heal of hand) in blood
  - 'Cut a covenant' always the language in OT
  - Rub dirt or dark substance into the wound – so that from every onwards, those people would see a visible reminder that they were in covenant together
    - A sacred act- Creating a new one-ness, between what had once been a two-ness
  - And when others in the land saw the chief, and saw that he had a covenant mark upon his hand, they would think twice before crossing that man – because you never knew who the covenant partner might be! He might be very powerful.

## Example of Abram

Genesis 12:1- The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

- Suddenly the God of all reveals himself to Abram!
- Abram chooses to follow this revelation from heaven
- God called Abram with a **promise**
  - The statement of a promise indicates that a covenant is coming.
- Lots of stuff happens to Abram in Gen 12-15. He arrives in Canaan (very lush land at time)
- By Gen 15, God is ready to **ratify his promise**

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

- Abram has had a promise from God, and he is waiting for a covenant
  - Excitement in the text! Abram is probing God. Its bartering. He is pointed out stuff 'I have no heir'. He is fishing for ratification!
  - Abram is saying 'I've not seen much evidence of your promise. When are we going to strike a deal?' (in very polite language)

### Gen 15:10-20

So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates- the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

- God wanted a covenant (and the people who read this passage originally knew exactly what was happening).
  - Not in text – but suggestion is that after Abram lays out the pieces, he walks between them (probably as quick as he could!)
- **Its awesome! God has made a covenant with Abram**
  - Abram is now 'at one' with God
  - Never been done before! The God of heaven has made a covenant with a mortal man!
  - And has symbolized his presence with symbols which will continue throughout the scriptures to indicate the presence of God (smoke, darkness, fire)

- **In that gesture – God says it’s a covenant. God chose to begin a relationship on that day, that continues until now**
  - Because you believe in Jesus, you are a recipient of the covenant that God made with Abram. As the ‘people of God’
- **God never breaks his covenant**

### The Covenant Scar

- A while later, when Abram was 99 years old, God speaks again to him. Gen 17:1-14
  - Scar of covenant is circumcision
  - Change of name for Abram to Abraham, and for his wife from Sarai to Sarah
  - A promise
    - Father of many nations (which is what Abraham means ‘father of many’)
    - An everlasting covenant to all your descendants
    - The land of Canaan
    - “I will be your God” and “I will be their God” (the descendants)
- **All of the resources of heaven are now at Abraham’s disposal**
  - More sheep and cattle than he needs
  - Protection from the King of Egypt
  - Those enemies coming against Abram now come against GOD TOO – sure to loose

### What does this mean for us?

- We’ll look in more detail in coming weeks
- God owns everything. When he makes a COV with mortal people, he chooses to make his resources available to them
- Anyone who has faith in God now has the opportunity to enter into the covenant of Abram.
  - Faith in God has to come through faith in Jesus Christ – the son of God
    - Who made a new covenant – (a widening of the original covenant) - available to ALL humankind – whatever race/colour, Jews and Gentiles
    - To whoever will accept Jesus through faith
- **Jesus came and died for us, so that thru his blood he established a New Covenant**
  - Now the corridor of blood is that of God’s own precious son
  - Now the covenant scar is those marks on Jesus’ hands and feet from his earthly crucifixion
- Thru faith – we are the decedents of Abram – we are God’s people Apostle Paul says – ‘you by faith are a descendant of Abraham. (Rom 4:16)
  - **In the same way God established his covenant, protection, provision, promise with Abram... Jesus opens the way for the same for us today**
  - **All of the resources of heaven are now available to you**
- **God says:**
  - I’m coming to take on your identity – to take you as one of my own
  - You aren’t just going to know *about me* – now you’re going to know me face to face
  - Now we are friends,
  - now we are family
  - now we have the same name

*We’ll unpack more in coming weeks. So we can understanding it and build our faith through ‘getting it’.*

For now Let these truths sink in.

- All of the resources of heaven are now available to you
- Now we are called friends of God, covenant brothers.
- Now God gives us a new identity, he swaps identities just like the chief's swapped sides through the corridor of blood –
- Our identity before God is no longer that of sin and fallen humanity, but that of the son of God, the sinless Jesus.
- **Jesus became sin, that we might be called son**

ENCOURAGE YOU TO:

- Live your life as a covenant person
- Mark each day by a covenant-making decision
  - This day Jesus, I lay down my life again.
  - Because I know that in doing that, I receive yours in fuller measure