

Under the Covenant...

As we have established in previous lessons, we view the scripture according to the claims that it makes for itself. It is the word of God. It is intended for all people of all times. There are applications that God intends for us to make to our lives. The scriptures are not given to be merely theoretical, to be used for a solely intellectual endeavor. However, we also must understand that the scriptures were not produced and delivered in a vacuum. They were written to real people, in a real time. There is an historical setting to each passage that may have a significant impact on our application in the present. We often are faced with the question: "What applies to me?" With this lesson, we want to begin to answer that question by looking at the way that God has interacted with His people since the beginning of time. This will show that there is a particular way in which God interacts with His people at any given time, and that He has a way of showing what His expectations are.

Covenants...

From the very beginning of time, God has formed covenants with mankind. Throughout scripture we are able to either see the covenant itself, or we see the results of the covenant. A covenant is:

1 a disposition, arrangement, of any sort, which one wishes to be valid, the last disposition which one makes of his earthly possessions after his death, a testament or will. 2 a compact, a covenant, a testament. 2A God's covenant with Noah, etc.¹

We understand the nature of a covenant between men. Each party agrees to certain terms, and are expected to keep their agreement. If one chooses to break the covenant that they have made, the other is released from the terms. We have several kinds of covenants which exist in our society, which are often reflected in contracts. Marriage is a covenant. Many jobs operate on a covenant. Even major purchases are often conducted under a covenant.

God has operated under covenants from the time of the creation. The pattern of His covenants are quite similar across time. In fact, there are many elements that are very similar, and familiar, across all the covenants that God has made with various groups. However, as D.R. Dugan stated in his book, *Hermeneutics*:

"Each covenant that God has made with men may have many things in common with all the others, and yet be distinct. There is nothing more common than to mistake similarity for identity. Several things are the same in both, and therefore it is concluded that they are identical, except that the one is more complete in some particulars than the other."²

We will note several similarities in these covenants, but as we do so we must recognize that just because they are similar does not mean they are the same! We will see why this is such an important point later in our study.

Each of these covenants include both God's part in the agreement and man's part. In each covenant, God gives His instructions (the expectations or commands that He has for the people), and what He will provide to those who are obedient. The people, for their part, are expected to be obedient. If they choose to obey, they will receive the blessings that are the fulfillment of God's

¹ Strong, James. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon 1995* : n. pag. Print.

² Dungan, D.R. *Hermeneutics, A Text Book (Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas)* p. 108

promises. We do need to note that there have always been consequences for rejecting the covenant that God has provided. This is one area that God's covenants differ from those between men. In many types of covenant, if an individual does not like the terms that are offered, he can simply choose to not enter the covenant. This can be illustrated in a covenant offered for the purchase of a house. If the price is not acceptable, or if there are issues with the house that cannot be resolved, then the purchase agreement (or covenant) would simply be rejected and both parties would walk away from it. There is nothing that obligates the individual from entering a covenant that he does not like.

God's covenant with men would be more akin to the law, or covenant of the land. Simply by being born in the United States, one is amenable to its laws. One cannot simply decide that they are not interested in following the law concerning murder, for example, and thus walk away from the covenant without entering it. One who murders will be held accountable to law, whether they like it, or agree with it. There are consequences for failing to conform to the societal covenant. To break the law, or the covenant, leads to punishment imposed by the society that originates the covenant. One can choose not to conform to the covenant, but that does not free him from the consequences of that covenant. The same is true for God's covenants. While men have the free will to choose to reject the covenant, or disobey God's law, they cannot escape the consequences of rejecting the covenant. When one is disobedient to the law that God has revealed, they will suffer the consequences of their choice.

One last point to consider before we examine the various covenants that have been delivered by God: a covenant is only applicable to the person or people to whom it is extended. This is easily understood when we consider the law of particular nations. We, in the United States, for example, are not bound under the laws of Iran, Russia, or any other nation. We are subject to the laws that have been conferred on us by the nation that we live in, the United States. If a person were to travel to one of these nations, then they would be subject to the laws of that land, whether they approve of, or like those laws. When a law changes, one is not responsible for following the older law. One is only subject to the law or covenant that is currently in place over him.

Likewise, when we examine these various covenants that were delivered by God, we will see that they were only applicable to those people to whom they were given. This is important because it speaks to God's expectations. When He gave a covenant, He expected the people who received that covenant to be obedient to its instructions. When a covenant changed, the people who received the newer covenant were not held accountable to the one given before it. Even when the terms were very similar, their obligation was not to the previous covenant. As we look at these transitions, it is extremely important to see that the obligation of the people is only to the covenant they were currently under--not the previous one, and certainly not the next one!

Now, let's consider the various covenants that are present in scripture. Notice that God does not specify in every one of these that He was making a covenant, and yet we see the elements of the covenant present.

The covenant made with Adam. At the time of creation, God made His first covenant with man. He gave Adam very specific instructions, and with those instructions came a promise of what God would provide for him. In Genesis 1:28-29, God told Adam what He had, and would provide for him. In return, He gave dominion to the man, which came with responsibility. He gave dominion over the animals, and He gave all of the plants for food. God also gave Adam and Eve the responsibility to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it..."

Along with these instructions, God declared that Adam and Eve could eat of every tree in the gar-

den, except for one: the tree of knowledge of good and evil (See Genesis 2:16-17). As the giver of the covenant, God had the right to provide instructions of what was allowed, and what was not allowed. Adam and Eve were not in a position to decide whether they would enter the covenant or not. They were under the law, their only choice was whether they would obey or not! The consequence for the disobedience of Adam and Eve was that they were separated from God, cast out of the beautiful garden that He had provided for them. Instead of God providing everything that they needed and wanted, Adam and Eve were cursed, forced to toil over the ground to produce food, and thorns and thistles would impede their work (Genesis 3:17-19). For Eve, God placed her in submission to her husband, and said that her pain in childbearing would be increased. God took away blessings that were contingent on obedience, and imposed punishment for the disobedience! These are key components of the covenants that God made for all men!

Second covenant with Adam and Eve. The second covenant that God made with Adam and Eve was reliant less on what they would do, than what they had already done. Their actions destroyed the relationship that they had with God, and set into motion the process by which God would restore man to Himself. God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, bearing the consequences of their sin. The consequences of their sin would be the new reality for all mankind. They would bear the challenges imposed upon these two who were guilty for the rest of time. However, in the midst of handing down these consequences, God also provided a message of hope. Consider:

So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:14-15).

This is the first Messianic prophecy, declaring the coming of the one who would defeat Satan, and the evil that he carried with him. This is a part of God's promise concerning the state of mankind. They would not be forever entrapped by the deceitfulness of Satan. God had a plan for redemption, and it would be implemented because of the sin that Adam and Eve brought into the world (See Romans 5:12-21; 1 Peter 1:17-21). God's covenant was that He would send one who would defeat Satan. Until that time, man would have to struggle with sin and its consequences. Through this prophecy, we have a foreshadowing of the last, and greatest covenant that God would make with mankind.

God gave instructions for how man was to serve and worship Him under this covenant. It is under the giving of the second covenant with Adam that we find the children of Adam offering sacrifices to God (Genesis 4:3-5). The Hebrew writer said that Able made his offering "by faith", which means that he offered it according to what God had declared to him (See Romans 10:17). This shows that God continued to have expectations for those that were His people. We are not given all the details of the instructions that were given to Adam and Eve, but we do know that God responded favorably to Able when he was obedient, and unfavorably to Cain because he was disobedient (See Genesis 4:7). As with all covenants with God, those who were obedient received His blessing, while those who were disobedient received His judgment.

God's first covenant with Noah. In God's first instruction to Noah, we find elements of a more traditional covenant, and God even identifies the agreement as such a covenant (Genesis 6:18). Noah was chosen by God because he acted righteously (Genesis 6:7-9). When all the rest of the earth had departed from following the will of God, Noah remained faithful. The judgment that the rest of the world was wicked is an indication that they had failed to keep the covenant that God had given to Adam and Eve! It seems logical that such would have been the law, or responsibility of the people of all the world at the time of Noah. Because of their failure, God determined that He would

destroy the whole world with a flood. But, because of his righteousness, God determined to spare Noah and his family. However, even his salvation was contingent on abiding by a covenant that God would make with him.

God's covenant was that if Noah would do what he was instructed to do, then he would be saved from the coming destruction. God gave Noah very specific instructions for the construction of an ark, in which He would save Noah's family as well as animals of the creation (See Genesis 6:13-22). God's covenant was that if Noah would obey, then he, his family and the animals collected would be spared from the destruction of the flood. One wonders what would have happened if Noah had failed to be obedient, and broken the covenant with God? As God's punishment on the whole world was the result of their disobedience, one would have to assume that Noah would be likewise punished if he failed to obey God's specific instructions! We cannot know what God might have done after the flood if there were no human survivors, but it is clear that Noah's salvation was contingent upon his obedience to the instructions of the Lord.

Notice that this covenant was very specifically made with Noah and his family. God was providing the opportunity of salvation to only this select group of people, and the requirements placed on them for their salvation was limited to them. We would never turn to Genesis 6, and come away with the supposition that we are to build a giant ark as a prerequisite to our salvation! However, we can learn a valuable lesson. When God gives instructions, He intends for them to be strictly kept. So, though we are not given the instruction to build an ark (that was a part of Noah's covenant, not ours), we can learn that we are expected by God to be obedient to the instructions that He has given to us!

God's second covenant with Noah. After coming out of the ark, God formed another covenant with Noah, which He declared to be true for all mankind, as well as the rest of all creation. In this covenant, God declared that He would never again destroy the world with a flood (Genesis 9:8-17). God created the rainbow to be a reminder of this covenant that He made with all flesh. Noah's part of the covenant was expressed in his worship and service before God (Genesis 8:20-22). It appears that it is Noah's continued faithfulness throughout this entire process that brings God to make this covenant with Him. It is interesting to note that though Noah's righteousness played a part in God's decision to instill the covenant, his continued righteousness was not a requirement for God to maintain the covenant. Because of this, this particular covenant stands out as different from some of the other covenants we will consider.

God also provided instructions for how He intended men to behave (Genesis 9:1-7). Notice that God did not make the covenant concerning the destruction of the world by flood contingent on man's obedience. He would impose other consequences on those who would be disobedient to His instructions moving forward. In fact, in Genesis 10, we see such a departure from God's instructions that He chose to confuse the languages of men so that they would be distributed across the world (as He had intended from the beginning). He did not, however, revoke His part of the covenant because of their disobedience. He made that an everlasting covenant which would never be contingent on the actions of mankind. The covenant was not made only with humans, but with "all flesh." For the sake of the creatures who could not submit (in a cognizant manner) to the instructions of God, He declared that He would never destroy the earth in this manner again!

The Messianic covenant with Abram. The first covenant that God made with Abram is found in Genesis 12:1-3. God spoke to Abram and told him that he needed to leave his home land, and travel to a land that would be shown to him. In his obedience, God declared that he would make of him a great nation. The end result would be that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is the promise of the coming Messiah through the lineage of Abram. Of course, it would be impossible to

separate the promise of making Abram a great nation, and the blessing of the all nations through his lineage, as the Messiah would come through the nation that sprang from Abram. This covenant, as with the others that were made with Abram, would be repeated several times throughout the Old Testament history. Many of these covenants would be repeated to Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

The Land Covenant with Abram. This covenant can first be found in Genesis 12:7. It would be more clearly outlined for Abram just a short time later (Genesis 13:14-17). At a time when Abram may have felt like he was losing the best of the land (because he had given Lot first choice), God made it clear that He was going to give Abram far more, and better land than what Lot had received. It was also during the expounding of this covenant that God promised to also make Abram a great nation. He would make the people of Abram as numerous as the sands of the seashore!

This covenant would eventually be sealed by blood. In Genesis 15:7-21 Moses recorded the interaction between Abraham and God. On that occasion, Abraham asked for a confirmation that he would receive the land that had been promised to him. In response, God instructed Abraham to bring a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon, which he would split down the middle (except for the birds) and lay each side opposite the other. In this was the shedding of blood! Later, as a confirmation of the covenant, Abraham saw “a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.” This was the representation of Jehovah, passing through the pieces to confirm the covenant that was made. Abraham was now bound with God in the covenant. He was to be obedient, and God would provide the blessings!

It is interesting to see the connection between God’s fulfillment of the covenant and the obedience of Abram and his children after him. For example, Isaac had the promise repeated to him, but God told him that He would provide the blessing of this covenant (the land) because of the faithfulness and obedience of his father Abraham (Genesis 26:1-5). However, as time would pass, the keeping of the land would be contingent upon the obedience of the nation (the descendants of Abraham). Later, they would lose the land, and be taken into the Assyrian captivity, and then (for the southern tribes, the nation of Judah) the Babylonian captivity. This was a direct result of their violation of the rules of God’s covenant. They would not be permitted to keep the land if they refused to be obedient to God. Because of their idolatry (among other sinful practices) they had the land taken away, with only a small remnant allowed to return to possess the land following the captivity. They would never regain the land to the same extent that they had before their punishing captivities.

God’s Covenant of Circumcision with Abram. God instituted the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (notice his name change from “Abram” to “Abraham” in Genesis 17:5). Abraham was told that circumcision would be the sign of the covenant that God had made with him, and that it would be a perpetual sign for him and his descendants after him (Genesis 17:9-14). This should have served as a reminder of their responsibility to remain faithful to the Lord. They had the sign of the covenant in their flesh! It was in this manner that God separated out one particular people from all the rest. Through this act, God began the process of making Abraham and his descendants different than the people around them.

It is clear that God instituted this covenant of circumcision as its own action. However, it cannot be completely separated from the other covenants that God made with Abraham, those concerning being given a great land and having all the nations of the earth blessed through his seed. But, as D. R. Dungan stated:

“...while these covenants have just this much relation to each other, it is entirely improper to speak of them as but one covenant. All the contracts which God has made with the different portions of the race have had some reference to this great salvation in Christ; but that fact does not make them one

and the same covenant.”³

Each of these promises or covenants was based upon obedience. Either it was based on Abraham’s own obedience (the right of his descendants to gain the land that he was promised); or it was based on the obedience of the people after him (the right to keep the land). God would keep His promises! He would be faithful to the covenant that He made.

God’s Covenant with the Nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. This next covenant strays from pattern of the previous ones because in it God made a covenant with the nation of Israel, rather than only with an individual. With this covenant, God conferred the blessings and promises that He had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the people of Israel. He was, in fact, extending the covenants that had been previously made to the whole of the people who were the descendants of Abraham (the fulfillment of the “great nation” promise). God specified these principles to Moses as He provided the covenant to the people:

I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them. I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: ‘I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.’ ” (Exodus 6:3–8)

Some have mistakenly supposed that God was telling Moses that He had never formed a covenant with anyone before under His memorial name of Jehovah. Most likely, what is translated as a statement to Moses is supposed to really be a question. He was not stating that He had never been known as Jehovah to those that had come before and with whom He had forged covenants. In fact, it is in Genesis 15:7 that we see God identifying Himself as Jehovah to Abraham when He confirmed the land and great nation covenants with him. The Hebrew writer said this concerning the covenant with Abraham:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13–18)

This is a reference back to God’s confirmation of these same covenants in Genesis 22 (when Abraham took Isaac to offer him on the mountain):

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Genesis 22:15–18)

In these interactions with Abraham, God identified Himself as Jehovah, the very memorial name He

3 Dungan, D.R. *Hermeneutics, A Text Book* (Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas) p. 118

used when addressing Moses at the time He forged the covenant with the children of Israel.

The covenant made at Sinai would be broken by the people and re-established by God on more than one occasion. Probably the most evident example of this was shortly after the covenant was first given. After giving the covenant, God instructed Moses to climb up Mount Sinai so that it could be written on tablets of stone (see Exodus 24:1-18). Moses spent 40 days on the mountain. While coming down from the mountain, with the newly carved tablets of stone containing the covenant (the 10 Commandments), Moses and Joshua heard the celebration of the people in the camp, as they worshiped the golden calf that was made by Aaron (see Exodus 32, especially verse 19). When Moses came near the camp, he threw the tablets with the covenant on them down, and broke them. This was not, as many seem to want to attribute to Moses, a fit of rage. He was angry, but the breaking of the tablets was a sign of the breaking of the covenant. The people had sworn to keep the covenant of the Lord, and yet, they had chosen to break it. After the consequences imposed on them by God, there was a need for Him to re-offer the covenant to the people. Once again, Moses had to return to the mountain so that the stone tablets could be re-done. Moses spent another 40 days, during which God gave him further instructions, and told him to write down all that he had been commanded (Exodus 34:27). God wrote the 10 commandments on stone once again, and gave them to Moses (Exodus 34:28). This illustrates the way in which God showed mercy to His people. They could have simply been destroyed (as God often threatened to do to them) because they had violated their part of the covenant. Punishment was justified, or deserved. But, God did not destroy them. Instead, He chose to provide another opportunity for them. This pattern would be repeated multiple times, with the offer of the covenant extended again and again to the people of Israel. Each time God chooses to not destroy the people completely, He was extending mercy to the people, and re-establishing the tenants of this particular covenant. Even in extreme cases, as in the time of the rebellion, where the people refused to move into the promised land and possess it, as He had prepared it for them, God still showed mercy. In that particular instance, one generation was not permitted to enter the land, but God made provisions for the next generation to take possession of it. It was with that second generation that God established His covenant once more, fulfilling His land promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

This would be the last of the covenants made with the Israelites. As stated above, it would be renewed with them from time to time, ranging from Moses' day up to the time of the return of the captives from the Babylonian captivity. But, then there would be a period of silence, in which God did not speak to His people for a period of about 400 years. At the end of that period, God would bring about a completely new covenant with mankind, that would be drastically different than any covenant He had previously had with them.

Many of the prophets spoke of the coming of a covenant. Jeremiah probably addressed this transition more clearly than any of the other prophets:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

Jeremiah makes it clear that this new covenant would not be “according to the covenant” that had

been earlier delivered. Recognizing this period of transition is crucial to realizing what God expects of us today. Once the transition was complete, there would be no further obligation to following a defunct covenant.

God's Covenant Through Christ. God's last covenant formed with mankind would be the one that He instituted through His son. This covenant was the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant that He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was through this Son that all nations of the earth would be blessed. Jesus Himself made it clear that when He came, He fulfilled the Law and Prophets:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17–18).

He was the only person to ever perfectly keep the covenant that God had given to man! He never violated anything that God required under it. Fulfilling the covenant, rather than breaking it, put Him into a position to usher in a new covenant with mankind. The Hebrew writer addressed this transition process in some detail. He described how this covenant is so much better than anything that had come before it. In fact, the Hebrew writer points out that God intended for the first covenant (the Law of Moses) to be flawed. If it had been perfect, there would have never been a need for another covenant, and all of the promises made to Abraham would be for naught (Hebrews 8:6-13).

The author of Hebrews made an extensive argument concerning the superiority of this new covenant that was mediated by Jesus. In many respects, it is shown to be far greater. In chapter 9, the Hebrew writer begins to establish the reasons this covenant is so much better. He started by showing that the Old Covenant was centered on the tabernacle (later the temple) and the worship that took place there. That house of God was nothing short of spectacular, and yet men were very limited in their access to God! Hebrews 9:1-10 briefly describes the worship that would take place at the tabernacle, but it also identifies one shortfall of that worship:

But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing (Hebrews 9:7–8).

There was an important access to God that was simply unattainable under the Old Testament covenant. Only the High Priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and that was only one time per year, with blood (Hebrews 9:7). Jesus, however, through the shedding of His own blood opened up access to the Most Holy Place, providing an access to God that had never existed since before the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden (see Hebrews 6:13-20). This opening up of the Most Holy Place was symbolized at the death of Jesus by the tearing of the veil in the temple (which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, Matthew 27:51). Now, access to the Most Holy Place was not limited only to the High Priests, but to all who were faithful to God under the coming, New Covenant. Just having this improved, personal access to God (rather than through another human intermediary, the High Priest) should be enough to show that this New Covenant is both different and better than that which came before it. But, the Hebrew writer did not stop there. He gave several more reasons to believe that the New Covenant is better than the Old.

We have a better High Priest. The High Priests of the Old Covenant were mere men, who were limited by both their sinful practices and the by the fact that they would die. These men could not make intercession for the people without first making an offering for themselves. How could they cleanse the people when they were corrupted themselves? Jesus came to be a new, and different type of High Priest. He is, as the Hebrew writer states, a priest "after the order of Melchizedek." While He-

brews 7 is a difficult section of scripture to understand in its detail, we can clearly see a couple of points that are important to understanding the importance of this transition to the New Covenant. First, Jesus could not be a priest in the Old Testament covenant. He was from the tribe of Judah, and only Levites could be priests under the Law of Moses (Hebrews 7:14). Second, if Jesus was to be the High Priest, then there was, of necessity, a change of the Law. If He could not be made High Priest under that Law (because of the genetic requirements) then the Law itself would have to change (Hebrews 7:12).

This High Priest was not made to be High Priest like those who came before Him. They were made High Priest because of their lineage; they were the sons of Aaron. Jesus, however, was made to be High Priest by an oath; the oath of God Himself (Hebrews 7:21).

Jesus, as High Priest, would also never die. There had been many High Priests that served under the Old Testament covenant. That had to happen because they would die, and need to be replaced (Hebrews 7:23-24). Jesus, on the other hand would live, and serve as High Priest, forever. Because He did not sin, and because He now lives and serves forever, there is no need for Him to continually offer sacrifices (both for Himself and the people) as the High Priests of old had to do (Hebrews 7:27-28). Why would we want to return to covenant that has an inferior priesthood, and an inferior High Priest?

We have better promises. We spent quite a bit of time showing that the covenant made with Abraham was based on several promises: Land, a great nation, all nations would be blessed. The Hebrew writer states that we under this new covenant, have better promises than what God provided under the Old Testament covenant (Hebrews 8:6). Most notably, we have in the New Covenant a promise of the forgiveness of sins, something that was not present under the Old Testament Covenant. Their forgiveness was tied inextricably to the sacrifice of Christ, and the institution of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:12). Forgiveness was not found in the sacrifice of animals:

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)

The fulfillment of the promise of God's grace and mercy are only found in the New Testament Covenant. Everything that was written before was pointing to the coming of that Covenant, and all the promises were reliant upon the coming of the New Covenant. Had there never been the sacrifice of Christ, there never would have been forgiveness for those under the previous covenants!

We have better sacrifices. It is impossible to separate this point from the previous one. We have the promise of the forgiveness of sins in the New Covenant, which is a far better promise than anything that came before it. That forgiveness is predicated on the sacrifice of Christ. He is the better sacrifice that has been offered for us; far better than the animal sacrifices of old!

The Hebrew writer addressed the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ more than once. The most detailed contrast of the sacrifices of the Old Testament and that of the New is found in Hebrews 9:1-10:18. In this section, the author points out the shortfall of the Old Testament sacrifices, and how the sacrifice of Jesus has surpassed them greatly. He provides several reasons for the superiority of the sacrifice offered by Christ:

He came through the greater and more perfect tent (Hebrews 9:11). The sacrifices of the Old Testament were centered around worship in the tabernacle. That "tent" was earthly, and only a shadow of the things that were in heaven (See Hebrews 10:23). These were copies of the true holy things in heaven. So, while the High Priests of old came through the earthly tabernacle to offer earthly sacrifices, Christ came through the true holy places, those found in heaven, to offer His greater sacrifice. Jesus came through the true Holy Places, while the priests of old served in the shadow!

The implications of this difference are astounding. Whereas the High Priests could offer sacrifices for the people, they were in the same condition as those people. Jesus, being sinless, could tear down the restrictions placed on imperfect men (they were not allowed, as a general rule, to enter the Most Holy Place). He has gone into the holy places “not made with hands,” into heaven itself! He is able to “appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Hebrews 9:24). He has, therefore, become a greater intercessor for men than the priests could ever hope to be!

He shed His own blood (Hebrews 9:12). The priests of the Old Testament covenant came shedding the blood of goats and calves for the sins of the people. Jesus did not come to shed the blood of another, but rather to shed His own blood, the perfect sacrifice for sin. He offered that which was His own to give, not volunteering the blood (life) of another.

I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:14–18).

The Hebrew writer made it clear that this blood was far more valuable than all the blood that had been shed before:

For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:13–15).

The best that the priests could do for their brethren was to offer the blood of another. They were imperfect themselves, and so had to offer their own blood would be pointless (Hebrews 9:7). He had to make an offering for his own sins before he could act as an intermediary for the people, and offer sacrifice for them.

He only had to offer Himself one time (Hebrews 9:25). The High Priests of old had to make many sacrifices for both themselves and for the people. They were offering animals at an astounding rate, killing thousands upon thousands of animals every year. But, even in all of that sacrifice, there was no removal of sin. The Hebrew writer said that in those sacrifices there was only a reminder of sin every year (Hebrews 10:3)! He did not have to offer Himself over and over, as the sacrifice of His own blood was sufficient for appeasing the wrath of God for all time. He offered Himself so that sins could be forgiven, rather than remembered (Hebrews 9:26-28). This shows the difference between the imperfect sacrifices of the Old Testament covenant, and the perfect sacrifice of Christ. With one sacrifice, He did away with all that was imperfect, and became the mediator of a better covenant (Hebrews 9:15, 10:14).

His sacrifice took away sins (Hebrews 10:10). As we saw earlier, the sacrifices of the Old Testament covenant could not take away sins. They, in fact, only served as a reminder of sins, year by year (Hebrews 10:3-4). But, His sacrifice served to offer forgiveness of sins to all those who would be obedient to God. This included those who served under previous covenants, as well as all who would serve Him moving forward. It was through this sacrifice that “eternal redemption” was offered to mankind (Hebrews 9:12-15). It was through this one sacrifice that He perfected all who would be sanctified (Hebrews 10:14). Why would anyone want to return to a covenant that could not remove

sins? With this sacrifice, there was true forgiveness of sins. That was a blessing that had never been granted before, under any covenant. The sacrifice of Christ established forgiveness for all who had been obedient to God under every other covenant He had established with mankind. Once true forgiveness was offered, through this one sacrifice, there would never be the need for sin sacrifices again (Hebrews 10:18)! This one perfect sacrifice replaced forever all that was imperfect before it.

We have a better medium and relationship with God (Hebrews 8:8-13). The Old Testament Covenant was written on tablets of stone, and delivered to the people. In that covenant, the people of God were born into His kingdom, and then had the responsibility to learn about Him. Under the New Testament Covenant, there would not be a need to teach those who were in the kingdom to “know the Lord” because they would already know Him! This was at the heart of the prophecy that Jeremiah made (Jeremiah 31:31ff). Instead of having the law written on stone, Jeremiah said the Law of the Lord would be written on the hearts of His people. The end result would be that God would have the relationship with His people that He desired, but never really accomplished under the Old Covenant. Under this New Covenant, it became necessary to have the Law of the Lord written in the heart to become one of His people. Without true conviction in the heart of the instructions of the Lord, one will never enter into this kingdom. You cannot end up in it by either lineage or accident. Why would anyone want to turn again to a covenant that is imperfect in its relationship with God?

Serving Under the Covenant...

After looking at all of these various covenants, the question we must address is: What covenant are we responsible to follow and obey? As we saw earlier in this study, a covenant is only binding on those people that are placed under it, those to whom it is given. As we have progressed, we have shown that each covenant presented by God was limited to those people who received His direction under it. We are not bound by God’s covenant with Noah to build an ark to receive His salvation!

The New Covenant instituted through the blood of Christ is the final covenant established between God and man. This covenant stands apart from all the others because it was instituted to replace all others, and to bring all men into one covenant with God:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11–22).

This is why Jesus, as He was preparing to ascend back to Heaven, was able to tell His disciples:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

The responsibility to proclaim the gospel and make disciple of “all nations” is the end result of this covenant being binding on “all nations.” Everyone is now amenable to the covenant of Christ. This is the type of covenant that one does not have to agree to in order to be under! Every person who is able to listen to the gospel and respond is responsible for their own obedience.

This is the last Covenant that God will present to mankind. After this, comes the judgment! He has sent His son to offer salvation. What more could He do? What could be left to offer? All that God presented to mankind throughout time was to bring us to that which was perfect. We have a perfect sacrifice, sealing a perfect covenant. There can be nothing more to look forward to in this life!

As we move forward in our study, we will continue to work from this established premise: there is only one covenant that we are bound under. We are not responsible for keeping any of the previous covenants that God has sent. We are, however, responsible to this last covenant, the one that has been sent for all mankind to follow. As we continue our study, we will spend more time establishing how we understand the instructions of that covenant. We will also spend some time in the next lesson showing how we can learn principles from the covenants that came before, but that we are not bound by the specific precepts of those covenants.

Questions...

1. What is a covenant?
2. List a few of the covenants that God has made with men throughout history.
3. List 4 ways that the New Covenant is better than the covenant made with Moses at Mt. Sinai.
4. Why is it significant that Jesus is a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” rather than after the Levitical Priesthood?
5. How was Jesus’ sacrifice greater than the sacrifices that came before, under other covenants?
6. Which covenant of God are we amenable to today? How do we know this?
7. Must one agree with the covenant of God before he is responsible for being obedient? Why or why not?

