

COVENANT - I

The word covenant literally means an agreement between two parties. This is expressed in different traditions and religions in different ways. What then, is a covenant? Most people think it is merely a promise or pact made between God and his people. While this is certainly one aspect of a covenant, there is actually much more to be considered here. Thus, it can be said that the Bible is essentially the story of God trying to establish an extended family for himself by reaching out to humanity time and again through a covenant or agreement. One other, very important aspect of a covenantal relationship is that there are consequences that will be incurred if either party should violate the terms upon which the covenant was established. We will see these consequences realized as we examine the Mosaic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant, among others.

Everyone is familiar with the story of the first covenant between God and man in the person of Adam. Found in the book of Genesis 2:1-24. No sooner is Adam created than he is assigned a position of authority in the temple of creation and given certain duties to perform. He is made in God's image and likeness, he is to "till the ground and keep it". Ultimately, what leads Adam to break this first covenant is what theologians have long termed the threefold fall, seeing that the "fruit" of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was "good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise." As we move forward in salvation history we will see that time and again, each covenant is broken by yet another manifestation of the threefold fall combined with a desire to "be like God" in defining good and evil.

An immense period of time has passed since the Fall of Man took place in the Garden of Eden. Humanity has increased in numbers and has spread throughout the known world. Tainted, however, by the stain of sin inherited from Adam, man has become increasingly perverse. Things get so bad that God decides to wipe out the human race and start over. Noticing the righteousness of Noah, however, God commissions him to build

an ark to house himself, his family, and two of every kind of animal. This is quite significant in terms of salvation history as the ark built by Noah is now the symbolic temple in which God's creation is to be preserved and restored. When the floodwaters subside, Noah sacrifices a lamb (New Testament imagery) in a priestly act. We now have another type of Christ who, like Adam, is a priest, prophet, and king. Pleased with Noah's sacrifice, God then establishes a "new" covenant with humanity (Genesis 9:8-13).

Following the incident of Babel when God confused the languages in order to humble the human race, God then chose a man named Abram to be the father of a new and great nation. God does this in order to bless all the nations by means of Abram and his descendants. The promises that God makes to Abram are threefold: "a great nation, a great name, and a blessing to everyone." Abram doubts whether God will accomplish these promises, and thus, as recorded in Genesis 15, God tells Abram to take several kinds of animals and cut them in half. Once Abram has done this, God's presence, in the form of a "smoking fire pot and a flaming torch," passes through the carcasses. Abram understood that this was God's way of establishing a covenant with him. The significance of cutting the animals in half lay in what it symbolizes. By passing through these animal parts, God is basically telling Abram, "If I don't keep my promises to you, then may I too be cut in half."

Abraham's grandson, Jacob is renamed Israel by God. His descendants will eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel. In the interim, however, one of Israel's sons, Joseph, is sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers who are jealous of him because of Israel's favor for him as the son of his second wife, Rachel. Through a complicated series of events recorded in Genesis 37-48, Joseph is appointed as the Pharaoh's right-hand-man, and saves his brothers and father from seven years of severe famine.

A few hundred years later is where Moses comes in. He will ultimately prove to be a type of Christ in leading the Israelites out of slavery, just as Christ leads His people out of the spiritual slavery of sin. He will also qualify as a priest, prophet, and king, just as the major biblical types of Christ before him.

After the famine was over, the sons of Israel decided to stay in Egypt, against the will of God for them to strive after the land He had promised to Abraham. Over time, the sons of Israel multiplied and integrated themselves into Egyptian society. Recognizing the need to deliver His people from Egypt in order to fulfill His promises to Abraham, God chose Moses as the instrument through which He would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. The sequence of events leading up to this can be found in Exodus 1-14.

Once the Israelites have been delivered from slavery, Moses ascends Mount Sinai, where God gives him the Ten Commandments written on two stone tablets. The stone itself is a representation of how hardened were the hearts of the people. This hardness was demonstrated when Moses returned to find that, in his absence, most of the people had returned to the worship of the pagan gods of Egypt. Enraged by the spectacle, Moses shatters the tablets on the ground to symbolize that the covenant has just been broken, and orders those who are faithful to God to slay the idolaters. Because the tribe of Levi were those who carried out this task, Moses declared that henceforth the priesthood should be given to the Levites rather than to the Israelites as a whole. Hence, the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament during Jesus' day can be traced. It is worth mentioning that John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus in Jordan River, was himself a Levite.

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After Moses' encounter with God, he breaks the two tablets of Stone of the Ten Commandments at the idolatrous attitude of people, and regrets the very character of the Israelites who

rejected the Living God. Moses then goes back up Mount Sinai and intercedes on behalf of the people, “reminding” God of His promise to Abraham. Thus, the covenant is renewed and a second set of tablets are given to Moses. It is also during this moment, as recorded in Exodus 36-37, that God commissions Moses to construct the Ark of the Covenant, in which will later be housed the manna (Exodus 16), Aaron’s staff (Exodus 7:8-13), and the stone tablets themselves. The Ark, of course, is a type of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the vessel in which the presence of God dwells among his people. Contained within the Ark is the manna, which is itself a figure of the Eucharist. Unfortunately, due to the hardness of the people and Moses’ own lack of trust in God, the Israelites were forced to wander in the desert for 40 years without entering the Promised Land. Only after the original generation delivered from Egypt had died off, did God bring them into the land that He had promised to Abraham so long ago. The Mosaic Covenant remained essentially unaltered from time of Moses’ successor, Joshua until the arrival of King David.

God therefore selects a humble shepherd boy named David to become the next king of Israel. With God’s favor upon him, David quickly conquers much of the surrounding region and takes Jerusalem as his capital. It is here that the Davidic Covenant is established when God promises to David a son who will “build God’s temple, be the Son of God, and rule over Israel forever” Notice that Jerusalem also sits on a mountain, just like Eden, Moriah, and Sinai. Here, God is promising a son to David in two senses. Literally, David’s son, Solomon, will possess these three characteristics, but prophetically, the Messiah, Who is to come from David’s line, will possess them in a much fuller and truer sense.

Then the great prophets arise as the “new covenant” which is promised to Israel when the Messiah comes. It is the span of several hundred years in which the Israelites are scattered, enslaved, and hoping for the coming of the promised Messiah prophesied in Isaiah 11:1, which reads, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Here, God promises His people that He will send another

from the line of David, and thus, that they will be great once again.

By alluding to the Davidic Covenant at various instances, God is implying that this “new covenant” will in some way be the restoration of the Davidic Covenant. As Jesus is the true Son of God and the “Son of David,” this restoration turns out to be true, although in a spiritual sense. Through misinterpretation of this prophecy, many Israelites are deceived into expecting a mighty, earthly ruler like David to be the messiah, who would lead them out of slavery. Their hearts were hardened to the possibility that God meant this prophecy in a spiritual rather than material sense.

There is also ample prophecy in Ezekiel for the coming of a new covenant: “I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods ... I will send down ... showers of blessing.” It is with the writings and admonitions of the major and minor prophets during this “Prophetic Covenant” that the Israelites maintained a sense of hope amid their hardships and abuses.

With the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ on Calvary, God has at last ushered in the New Covenant which He promised to Israel through Ezekiel so long ago. Each and every covenant that was made up to this point has been merely a foreshadowing of this New, Eternal Covenant, whereby mankind is restored in his relationship to God and is, by means of divine grace, taken into God’s family and endowed with the blessings and privileges of His kingdom. The Church in Heaven is the true promised land, the heavenly Jerusalem of which Eden, the ark, and David’s kingdom were merely types. The new, true temple in which God restores his people to Himself is the Body of Christ. Thus, we see that the temple of Eden, Noah’s ark, and even Solomon’s temple were prefiguration of the true temple of Christ’s Mystical Body. It is thanks to the infinitely meritorious sacrifice of Christ Whose Body is at once a temple and a sacrifice, we are now given a covenant that cannot be broken. This sacrifice, which extends forward for all time by means of the Mass, ensures that no sin, however great, will ever undermine the Covenant which God has

established with His own Blood. If as individuals, we suffer the misfortune of breaking our own relationship with God, we may simply repent by confessing our sins to a new covenant priest, through whom God manifests His presence in the world, so that, by means of Christ's most precious Blood, we may be cleansed of our sins and brought back into that covenantal relationship with God.

Jesus says that those who do not believe His words will be condemned on the last day and that the words are not His but those of the Father who has commanded what is to be said and how it is to be said (John 12:48-50). During the Passover meal Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it saying "this is My Body (the Lamb of God) take it and eat" (Matthew 26:26). It is important to note here what is said in John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When He speaks, He creates. ["And God said 'Let there be light': and there was light" (Genesis 1:3)] It is also interesting to note here that the blessing involved here involves a dual aspect; a God-ward action and a world-ward action. In the Hebrew way of thought, to bless anything and pronounce a thanksgiving over it are not two actions but one, which is summed up in a single word *barak*. This translates into a single Greek word *eucharisteo*, from which we get the name Eucharist. Jesus takes the cup of wine (the third cup in the Passover liturgy, the cup of blessing), gives thanks and says "drink from it, this is My Blood." He also says that this is "the blood of the covenant" [the only time Jesus ever uses the word "covenant" in Holy Scripture] (Matthew 26:27-28). Again, when He speaks, He creates. Giving thanks is *eucharisteo*.

The new covenant with its new obligations, instituted by Jesus the Christ, is also new because of its unique renewal practice. No longer is it necessary to sacrifice an animal every time the covenant is renewed; the ritual now joins us with the original sacrifice that began in the Upper Room and was completed on Calvary and is continually being presented to God the Father by His Son, the New High Priest and Sacrificial Lamb. In keeping with covenant ritual, the sacrifice is now consumed by the family of Jesus.

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