

# A Study of the Covenants of the Bible

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"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seeds it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). With these words spoken to Satan in the Garden of Eden within the hearing of Adam and Eve, the Lord God announced His plan of salvation for the first time. These few words proclaimed to fallen mankind the coming of the woman's Seed, the Savior, the One who would crush the devil's power. These words gave life, hope, peace and joy to God's people.

These words were sure words. The promise of a Savior was a sure promise. These words were spoken and this promise was given by God Himself, the One who cannot lie. As Balaam moved by the Lord said to Balak, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Num. 23:19). Nothing could have been surer for Adam and Eve and their descendants than God's words and God's promises.

Yet, as God at different times revealed further details of His plan of salvation and as He added ever clearer promises, He considered it necessary to give man additional assurances that His promises were sure. One of the ways in which God gave man such assurances was by establishing covenants, solemn agreements, by which God bound Himself to His word and promises.

We get some idea of how prominent a role covenants play in the Bible from the fact that Irenaeus around 180 AD named the two parts of the Bible after the Bible's two great covenants. He gave the name Old Testament (Old Covenant, the covenant made at Mt. Sinai) to the canonical writings before Christ's birth and he gave the name New Testament (New Covenant, the covenant made at Mt. Calvary) to the canonical writings written after Christ's ascension into heaven.

Let us now direct our attention to the study of the covenants of the Bible. First we will look at the Hebrew and Greek words for covenant and their significance: Then we will look at the covenants God made with man. Next some comments will be made regarding the Ten Commandments under the Old Covenant and under the New Covenant. Finally a few concluding remarks will be made.

## I. The Hebrew and Greek Words for Covenant

### The Hebrew Word

The Hebrew word for covenant is **בְּרִית**. It occurs nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament and is consistently translated "covenant." The word **בְּרִית** comes from the root **בָּרַח**. It may mean 1) to cut or 2) to eat. Thus **בְּרִית** may have come to be used for "covenant" for one of two reasons: 1) because it was customary in making solemn covenants for the contracting parties to pass between the divided (cut) parts of animals (God did this when He made His covenant with Abraham in Gen. 15:9.) or 2) because an eating together was almost the same thing for Orientals as making a covenant of friendship (Jacob and Laban ate a meal when they made a covenant of peace to settle their differences.).<sup>1</sup>

There are several examples of purely human covenants in the Old Testament. There were covenants between individuals. To settle family hostilities Jacob and Laban made a covenant of peace. Laban suggested, "Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee" (Gen. 32:44). They set up a heap of stones as a witness to their mutual pledges, offered sacrifices and ate a covenant meal. Of the heap of stones Laban said, "This heap be witness and this pillar be witness, that I will not

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew Chaldee Lexicon*, p. 141

pass over this heap to thee and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me for harm” (Gen. 31:52). To seal their friendship and guarantee a peaceful relationship David and Jonathan made a covenant. “Then Jonathan made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:2). As a witness of this covenant Jonathan gave David his robe and sword. The relationship entered into by husband and wife in marriage was also regarded as a covenant. Speaking against the man contemplating divorce Malachi said, “The Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously; yet is she thy companion and the wife of thy covenant” (Mal. 2:14).

There were also covenants between tribes. Abraham and Abimelech, a Philistine king, made a covenant. When Abimelech saw the blessings Abraham was enjoying, he wanted to secure his friendship. After settling a dispute over a well that had been taken from Abraham by some Philistines, apparently without Abimelech's knowledge, “Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant” (Gen. 21:27). The sheep were a gift to Abimelech and apparently the oxen were sacrificed. Some years later Isaac concluded a similar covenant with Abimelech (Gen. 26:28). At Mt. Sinai God forbade the Israelites to make covenants with the tribes of Canaan. “Thou shalt make no covenants with them, nor with their gods” (Ex. 23:32). When Nahash the Ammonite attacked Jabesh Gilead, the men of Jabesh wanted to make peace. They appealed to Nahash, “Make a covenant and we will serve thee” (1 Sam. 11:1). When Nahash wanted as one of the conditions of the covenant that all the men of Jabesh put out their right eyes, the men of Jabesh refused and appealed to Saul for help.

There were also covenants between kings. Ahab, king of Israel, defeated Benhadad, king of Syria. Ahab, moved by Benhadad's offer, refused to put him to death as the Lord wanted. Instead he made a covenant with him. “And Benhadad said unto him, ‘The cities which my father took from thy father, I will restore; and thou shalt make streets for thee in Damascus, as my father made in Samaria.’ Then said Ahab, ‘I will send thee away with this covenant’” (1 Kings 20:34).

From this use of the term. בְּרִית in the Old Testament we see that it expressed the idea of a covenant, solemn agreement, bond, alliance, treaty, pact, or contract. A covenant was used to make something certain. We also see that the Old Testament people were as familiar with covenants as we are with contracts and treaties.

All this helps us to understand God's covenants with man. However, when we talk about God's covenants with man, there is, as we shall see, one large difference. God's covenants are not covenants between two equal parties. They are very one-sided or unilateral. God is the active party. He sets the terms. Man is purely receptive. He receives the benefits which God obligates Himself to bestow. Robert Girdlestone brings this out in *Synonyms of the Old Testament*:

Translators have found much difficulty in giving a uniform rendering to the word *berith* even in the Old Testament. Expressions answering to the words alliance, bond, compact, covenant, disposition, treaty have been resorted to, but none of them are perfectly satisfactory, and for this reason, that while they represent the nature of a covenant between man and man, none of them are adequate for the purpose of setting forth the nature of God's gracious dealings with man.<sup>2</sup>

### The Greek Word

The New Testament word for covenant is *διαθήκη*. It occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament, but is not consistently translated “covenant.” Translations usually waver between covenant and testament (will). For example, the King James Version translates *διαθήκη* as covenant twenty times and as testament fourteen times. The New International Version translates it as covenant thirty-two times and as will two times. An American Translation translates it as covenant thirty-one times, as will two times and as agreement one time.

There is a reason for this wavering. The usual Greek word for covenant, an agreement between two parties, is *συνθήκη*. Yet, the Holy Ghost inspired His writers to use the word *διαθήκη*. As was mentioned earlier,

<sup>2</sup> Robert Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, p. 214

God's covenants with man are very one-sided. The Greek word *συνθήκη* simply does not bring out this one-sided idea. The word *διαθήκη* does. In Hellenistic Greek the word *διαθήκη* always means last will and testament.<sup>3</sup> A will or testament (something that has been attested to or witnessed and hence is firm) is a very one-sided arrangement. The testator (will-maker) simply makes out his testament (will). He disposes of his property as he alone wants. Therefore some translators feel that *διαθήκη* should be translated as testament to bring out this one-sided idea. Others feel that it should be translated covenant to bring out the idea that it is referring to God's covenants. What makes it difficult for the translator to be consistent in translating *διαθήκη* as covenant is the fact that in Hebrews 9:16-17 and possibly in Galatians 3:15 the word *διαθήκη* is used solely in the sense of will. Hebrews 9:16-17 points out that the testator, will-maker, (Christ) has to die before his will goes into effect. Why the King James Version wavers so much in its use of covenant and testament, I do not know. The New International Version is much more consistent.

## II. The Covenants

### The Adamic Covenant (?)

In Gen. 2:16-17 God gave Adam the familiar command which would enable him to show his love for his Creator, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.'" Some Bible students call this command along with its threat of punishment a covenant. They say that the sabbath day of Gen. 2:1-3 is the sign or distinguishing mark of this covenant.<sup>4</sup> They say that Hosea 6:7 may support their view.<sup>5</sup>

The reason for considering this command to be a covenant is not very conclusive. In Hosea 6:7 the prophet is telling Judah to repent of its sin of breaking God's Sinaitic Covenant. The prophet brings a message from the Lord, "But they like men (Like Adam is a better translation.) have transgressed the covenant: there they have dealt treacherously with me." The point seems to be that the people of Judah forgot their obligation to love the Lord and yielded to their own desire, just as Adam did in the Garden of Eden. Even if it could be proved that God did establish a covenant with Adam in Eden, there would be no reason for regarding the sabbath day of Gen. 2:1-3 as its sign.

### The Noahic Covenant

Genesis 4 informs us that the descendants of Adam and Eve were soon divided into two distinct groups, the Cainites and the Sethites. The Cainites, like their unbelieving forefather Cain, despised God's grace, rejected the Gospel promise and lived wholly for this life. The Sethites, on the other hand, like their believing forefather Seth, believed the Gospel promise and began to proclaim it, "to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26).

Genesis 6 reports the sad fact that as the centuries passed by and man began to increase on the face of the earth, the Sethites began to push their faith and spiritual heritage into the background. They began to intermarry with the unbelieving Cainites. The result was a gradual spiritual defection and the prevailing of sin and unbelief. Finally the Lord was moved to action. "And the Lord said, My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years" (Gen. 6:3).

It was while this one hundred twenty year period of grace was drawing to a close that God's covenant with Noah is mentioned for the first time. After announcing that He was going to send the flood, God said to Noah, "But with thee will I reestablish my covenant" (Gen. 6:18). Bible scholars are divided over which covenant God is referring to. Some feel that God is referring to the covenant He is going to make with Noah after the flood. God then by telling Noah of this future covenant was assuring Noah that he would survive the

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> "Covenants (Part II)," *Present Truth*, Volume 5, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> "Covenants (Part I)," *Present Truth*, Volume 5, p. 18.

flood so that the covenant could be made. Others feel that God is referring to a two-phase covenant that He had previously made with Noah. The two phases are the preserving of Noah during the flood and the assuring Noah after the flood that it will never happen again. They feel that God in verse eighteen is telling Noah that He is now going to put phase one of His covenant into effect. In either case God's covenant gave Noah assurance that he would survive the flood.

After the flood the Lord said to Noah, "And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you" (Gen. 9:9-10). God is either putting phase two into effect or establishing His covenant for the first time depending on your view. God gave the substance of His covenant. "Neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). Finally God gave Noah a token, a distinguishing mark, of His covenant. He said, "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9:13).

God's covenant with Noah was entirely one-sided. God set the terms. He made the promises. He bound Himself to keep them. Noah and his family were merely recipients. God wanted Noah and his family to be as sure as possible that such a terrible judgment would never again be pronounced as long as the earth remained.

God's covenant with Noah served the Gospel promise He had made in the Garden of Eden. By keeping Noah and his family alive God did not break off the Messianic line that ran from Adam and Eve down to Christ. By preserving the world God is giving man an ample time of grace, ample opportunity to hear the Gospel and be brought to faith. At a critical time in history and in the life of Noah, the Lord established a covenant.

### **The Abrahamitic Covenant**

It was the Lord's plan to choose and prepare for Himself a particular people to receive His promises and to bring the promised Savior of all men into the world. The Lord in grace called Abraham, a descendant of Noah's son Shem, to be the forefather of those chosen people and of the promised Savior.

The calling of Abraham is recorded in Gen. 12:1-5. The Lord told Abraham to leave his father's house. He promised to give Abraham a land and to make of him a great nation. He also assured Abraham "that in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This was the promise that the Savior would be one of his descendants. Abraham believed these promises and in faith left his father's house.

Sometime later, after Abraham and Lot had separated because the land could not support their combined flocks, the Lord repeated His promises to Abraham. "All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it and to thy seed forever" (Gen. 13:15-16).

Several more years passed. Still Abraham had no son. Without a son his seed could not be as numerous as dust, nor could the promised Savior be one of his descendants. Fearing that all his inheritance would go to his servant Eliezer because he was childless Abraham said, "Lord God, what will thou give me, seeing I go childless and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen. 15:2). The Lord then repeated His promises to give Abraham needed assurance. Abraham "believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Abraham wanting even greater assurance requested a sign. "Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Gen. 15:8). To give Abraham the assurance he needed the Lord gave the strongest outward guarantee known to Abraham – the concluding of a blood covenant in Chaldean fashion, which meant mutual loyalty for both contracting parties or death through the other party. Abraham cut in half the carcasses of a heifer, a goat and a ram. He laid the two halves of each animal on the ground opposite each other forming a path between them. (By walking on such a path between slain animals with raised torches, the two contracting parties concluded the covenant.)

After informing Abraham that his descendants after four hundred years of slavery would inherit their promised land, the Lord concluded the covenant. "And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (Gen. 15:17-18). Only the Lord appearing as a smoking furnace and burning lamp passed between the slain animals. Abraham did not. This covenant was entirely the Lord's doing.

It was completely one-sided. God set up the terms: the promise of a land, the promise of many descendants and the promise that the Savior would come from Abraham. God bound Himself to those terms. Abraham contributed nothing. He merely watched, believed and received. This was definitely a covenant of God's grace.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old and still childless, the Lord appeared to him and assured him once again that He would put His covenant promises into effect. He then gave Abraham circumcision as a token or sign of His covenant. "Ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin: and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Gen. 17:11). Abraham and his descendants who believed God's covenant promises would show their faith by being circumcised. Circumcision would be a constant reminder to them of their blessed covenant relationship with God.

God established this same covenant of grace with Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 17:19) and with Abraham's grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:4).

God's covenant with Abraham was in no way affected by the covenant which God later made with the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai. God's covenant with Abraham was a covenant of unconditional promises centering around the promised Savior. Paul emphasizes this truth in his letter to the Galatians. "Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; though it be but a man's covenant (Some feel that this should be translated "will."), yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth or addeth thereto. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, 'And to seeds,' as of many but as of one, 'And to thy seed,' which is Christ. And this I say that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law which was four hundred and thirty years after cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise, but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (Gal. 3:15-18).

The Covenant made with Abraham was fulfilled when Jesus was born. This is plainly taught in the words spoken by Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. When his son John, the forerunner of Jesus, was born he praised the Lord for raising "up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ...to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham" (Luke 1:69, 72-73). Another indication that this covenant was fulfilled in Christ is seen in the fact that its sign, circumcision, was done away when He came. Paul pointed out to the Galatians, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6).

### **The Sinaitic Covenant (The Old Covenant)**

The next covenant of God is the one after which the Old Testament is named, the Sinaitic.

After the Children of Israel had dwelt in the land of Egypt for over four hundred years as God had told Abraham they would (Gen. 15:13-14), "God heard their groaning and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob" (Ex. 2:24). It was time for the Lord to begin fulfilling His covenant promise that the descendants of Abraham would inhabit the land of Canaan. The fulfillment of this part of the covenant was a step toward its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

Under the leadership of Moses the Lord led His people out of Egypt. The 600,000-plus children of Israel reached Mt. Sinai three months later. Upon their arrival at Mt. Sinai Moses went up into the mountain and received a message from the Lord for the children of Israel, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation" (Ex. 19:4-6).

God was going to establish His covenant with His people. Again we see that the covenant originated with God. He set down the conditions of the covenant. He promised to regard Israel as His "peculiar treasure" and as a "kingdom of priests and an holy nation." But this time we see that God's covenant was not entirely one-sided. God attached certain conditions which His people were to meet, namely, to obey His voice. What this obeying would involve God showed when he gave His law.

The Israelites were ready to accept God's condition. They responded, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do" (Ex. 19:8).

Three days later the Lord appeared on Mt. Sinai in the form of fire accompanied by smoke and thundering and lightning. With this awesome display the Lord Himself set down the conditions of His covenant. He spoke to the Children of Israel the words of the Ten Commandments, the *Debarim* (Ex. 20:1-17). When God finished the Ten Commandments, the people were so terrified that they asked Moses to serve as their mediator. Moses agreed and went up into the mountain and there received further laws, the judgments, the *Mishpatim*, the Ten Commandments applied to the specific problems and conditions of Israel (Ex. 24:2). Moses then wrote the Ten Commandments and the judgments in the Book of the Covenant. This book was the basis upon which the Sinaitic Covenant was established. This book contained the voice the Israelites were to obey and the covenant they were to keep (Ex. 19:5).

The covenant was now ready for ratification. Moses erected an altar and twelve pillars of stone. The altar represented the Lord's presence and the pillars represented the twelve tribes – the two contracting parties. Next Moses offered burnt offerings to express Israel's thankfulness. Half of the blood of the sacrificial animals Moses sprinkled on the altar and half on the people to show the participation of both parties in the covenant. Then Moses, Aaron and his sons, and seventy elders of Israel went up into the mountain and participated in a covenant meal symbolizing fellowship with God (Ex. 24:4-14).

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Moses then went up into the mountain to receive the two tables of stone on which the Lord had written the Ten Commandments. At the same time the Lord designated the sabbath day as the sign of the covenant that had just been ratified (Ex. 31:12-17).

When Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, the Israelites broke the newly made covenant with their golden-calf idolatry. Through the intercession of Moses appealing in part to the promise of the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant was restored (Ex. 32-34).

The Lord then gave Moses details regarding Israel's worship life. He outlined a series of sacrifices which would atone for sin and restore the covenant relationship broken by that sin and sacrifices by which they could express their fellowship with God in the covenant relationship. The Lord also gave Moses regulations for the priesthood, purification laws and a holiness code (Lev. 1-27). All of these regulations and laws were based on and applications of the basic covenant laws written in the Book of the Covenant. This is the Sinaitic Covenant.

To properly understand the role this covenant played in the life of God's Old Testament people, we must keep in mind that it was not established so that through obedience to its demands the Israelites could be pardoned of their sins and received into fellowship with God. If that were true then the Old Testament would teach salvation by works. But, as we already heard, it does not. "The covenant (Abrahamic) that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul that it should make the promise of none effect" (Ga. 3:17). Rather the Sinaitic covenant was established for a people who were already pardoned and who were already in fellowship with God through the Abrahamic covenant of grace. We see evidence of this already in Ex. 3:7 at the calling of Moses. The Lord said to Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of *my* people." They were God's people because of the Abrahamic covenant. We see evidence also in the way in which the Lord introduced the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord *thy* God" (Ex. 20:1). Prof. August Pieper makes this pertinent comment in "The Glory of the Lord":

The Sinaitic legislation even as all later legislation does not have the import that through obedience to it Israel should first be justified before God, pardoned, and received into His sonship, but rather that as people who were already justified, pardoned, and received into His sonship through the Abrahamic

covenant of grace they were now also to walk thankfully and faithfully in the gracious ways of their gracious God.<sup>6</sup>

The Sinaitic covenant was to serve as a necessary discipline for people who were God's children, but immature children, immature in understanding, faith and sanctification. Paul stresses this truth in Gal. 3:19-4:3, "Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made... Now I say, That the heir as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all: but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world."

The Sinaitic covenant served as a discipline in three basic ways. First it served as a mirror to show the Israelites their sinfulness and need for a Savior. "The law entered that the offense might abound" (Rom. 5:20). In II Corinthians 3 Paul calls the Sinaitic covenant "a ministration of death" (3:9) and "a ministration of condemnation" (3:9). The Sinaitic covenant with its laws condemned the Israelites. It made them see their need for and the attractiveness of the Gospel promises of the Abrahamic covenant.

Secondly, the Sinaitic covenant served the Israelites as a needed hedge. Paul explained this hedge idea to the Galatians, "But before faith (the time of the New Covenant) came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster (slave-guardian) to bring us unto Christ" (Gal. 3:23-24). The Sinaitic covenant with its many regulations and laws hedged in and guarded the Israelites. It was to keep them as a holy nation, a nation set apart and kept apart from its heathen neighbors. It was to keep the Israelites separate so that they could serve as a beacon of salvation to nations shrouded in the darkness of heathenism. It was to keep the Israelites separate so that when the fullness of time would come the promised Savior could be born of them.

Thirdly, the Sinaitic covenant especially in its sacrificial code was to serve as a shadow of good things to come. Paul clearly states, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat or in drink or in respect to an holy day or of the new moon or of the sabbath days which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ" (Col. 2:16-17). The entire Book of Hebrews demonstrates how the Sinaitic covenant served as a "shadow of good things to come" (Heb. 10:1).

The Sinaitic covenant was a temporary covenant. It was in effect from the time it was concluded on Mt. Sinai until the time the new covenant was concluded on Mt. Calvary. Commenting on Jeremiah's prophecy that God was going to establish a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), the author of Hebrews noted, "In that he (God) saith, 'A new covenant,' he has made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13). A hint of the temporary nature of the Sinaitic covenant was given already at Mt. Sinai. Exodus 34 tells us that when Moses came down from the mountain after the renewal of the broken covenant "the skin of his face shone" (v. 30). But this shining did not last; it faded away. In II Corinthians 3 Paul points out that this was an indication that the Sinaitic covenant would not last forever. Moses put a veil over his face so that the Israelites could not see this indication of the Sinaitic covenant's temporary nature.

### **The Davidic Covenant**

When King David had succeeded in uniting both the houses of Judah and Israel, he moved the capital of his united kingdom to Jerusalem. He set up the tabernacle, returned the ark of the covenant to its proper place in the holy of holies and reinstated proper worship of the Lord. David also wanted to build a house for the Lord. He did not think that it was right for him to live in a palace of cedar and the Lord to live in a tent (II Sam. 7:2). Through the prophet Nathan the Lord told David that because he was a man of war, he could not build His house (I Chron. 28:3). Instead He told David that his son would build His house. "I will set up thy seed after thee... He shall build an house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever... And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established forever before thee: thy throne shall be established forever" (II Sam. 7:12-17). These words were much more than the promise that David's son Solomon would succeed him on the throne and build the Lord's house. They were also a promise that the Savior would be David's descendant and

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<sup>6</sup> August Pieper, "The Glory of the Lord," p. 11.

that through Him David's kingdom would continue forever. The angel Gabriel told Mary concerning her Son, "He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever: and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Psalms 89:1-3 indicates that the Lord confirmed this important promise for David by a covenant. The psalmist quotes the Lord, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant. Thy seed will I establish for ever and will build up thy throne to all generations." Again it is a one-sided covenant. The Lord sets up the covenant. He makes the conditions, namely, that He will put Jesus on the throne of David for ever. He binds Himself to the fulfilling of those conditions. David in faith merely receives and enjoys the wonderful promise.

This covenant is related to both the Abrahamic covenant and to the new covenant since it concerns the promised Savior. This covenant is still in force today. Jesus is still ruling over the house of Jacob, His believers. Jesus Himself tells us what kind of kingdom He has and what kind of king He is in John 18:36-37. Speaking to Pilate Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence... To this end and for this cause came I into this world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom in which He rules by testifying to the truth of the Gospel and in which those who listen to His Word enjoy the blessings of His rule. This is the kingdom into which the Holy Spirit has brought us.

### **The New Covenant**

The first reference to the new covenant is made by the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). It came during the darkest days of Judah's history. Judah, failing to heed the message of God's faithful prophets and defiantly breaking the Sinaitic covenant with its open idolatry and immorality, had been attacked and defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar. The city of Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins. All but the poor and elderly of Judah had been carried off into captivity.

Against this dark background Jeremiah's prophecy of better days and a new covenant stand out in sharp contrast. "Behold, the days come," saith the Lord, "that 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 bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them," saith the Lord. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days," saith the Lord, "I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts; and will be their God and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord;' for they shall all know me, from the least of them even unto the greatest of them," saith the Lord: "for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

"Behold the days come, saith the Lord" (v. 31). These days are a reference to the days of the New Testament age. Jeremiah is prophesying what will happen when Jesus sets up the new covenant. The Book of Hebrews leaves no doubt about this. "He is the mediator of a better covenant which was established upon better promises." Heb. 8:6 says. Then the author continues in verses six through ten by quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34 to show that the better covenant he is talking about is the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah.

The new covenant is definitely one-sided. "I will make a new covenant, says the Lord... I will put... I will write... I will forgive... I will remember no more." It is entirely the Lord's doing. He makes all promises. Nothing needs to be added. It is to be received in faith.

The new covenant is not "according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake" (v. 32). The new covenant is not like the Sinaitic covenant. The Sinaitic covenant had a "flaw." Heb. 8:7 points out, "For if that first covenant (Sinaitic) had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. But finding fault with them," he saith, 'Behold the days come,' saith the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant.'" The "flaw" was that the Sinaitic covenant could not produce what it demanded. It demanded obedience from the

Israelites, but it could do nothing to move their hearts to obey. Yet, the fact that the Israelites could not obey its laws is not really a 'flaw' of the covenant, it is a flaw of people themselves.

The new covenant is better than the old covenant because it is established upon "better promised" according to Hebrews 8:6. It is established upon God's own Gospel promises. Basically there are three such promises. The first promise is "I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts" (v. 33). Some feel that "law" is being used in the broad sense of God's Word and is referring to the Gospel itself. "I will put my Gospel into their hearts," is what they feel God is saying. God will bring people to faith in Jesus. He will change their hearts. Others feel that "law" is referring to God's immutable will, the moral law. "I will bring people to faith and change them inwardly so that they will gladly subject themselves to My Law. My Law will become a part of them," is what they feel God is saying. In either case the new covenant promise will do what the old covenant demands could not – give man a new heart and move him to want to obey God's Law.

The second promise is "they shall know me from the least of them even unto the greatest of them" (v. 34). To know the Lord is to have saving faith. "This is life eternal that they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Under the new covenant God imparts saving faith through His Word. This is something God did not do through his old covenant. God did indeed impart saving through His Word in Old Testament times, but He did not do it through His old covenant. He did it instead through the Abrahamic covenant and through His Gospel promises of the Savior.

The third promise is really the basis for the first two: "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" (v. 34). The new covenant offers the forgiveness of sins. It has the perfect and complete sacrifice for sin only foreshadowed by the old covenant – the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Forgiveness of sins is the great blessing given and received in the Lord's Supper. Taking the cup Jesus said, "This cup is the new testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). When Jesus gave the cup to His disciples, they received His blood as the sacrificial blood that ushered in the new covenant, the covenant that consisted in the promise of forgiveness.

"I will make a new covenant" (v. 31), said the Lord. He made that covenant when His Son died on the cross. In this respect the new covenant is like a will, namely, there has to be a death before it goes into effect. "For where a testament (will) is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator (will-maker). For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth" (Heb. 9:16-17). The necessary death has taken place. The new covenant is in force.

### **III. The Ten Commandments Under the Old and the New Covenants**

Do the Ten commandments, the Third Commandment in particular, apply to us today? No. Not in the form in which they are found in Exodus 20. We are living in the age of the new covenant. The old covenant with all its laws including the Ten Commandments has been replaced by the new covenant. The Sabbath as a sign of the old covenant no longer applies. "In that he saith, 'A new covenant,' he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13).

Does that mean that we are without God's Law in the new covenant? By no means. God has revealed His Law, His immutable will, in the pages of the New Testament. What is said there applies to us. A quick look at the New Testament reveals laws that are in some cases different from and in some cases exactly like the Ten Commandments of the old covenant. For example, there is this word about idolatry, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Regarding the use of God's name Paul says, "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not" (Rom. 12:14). Jesus mentions the Sabbath, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29). Nothing is said about observing the seventh day in this connection. Regarding superiors Paul says, "Honor thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:2-3). Notice the way in which Paul changed the wording of the Fourth Commandment from its old covenant form to make it suitable for new covenant usage. In Romans 13:9 Paul repeats the rest of God's holy will, "Thou shalt

not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet.” Also in the age of the new covenant God has revealed His immutable will to be used as a mirror, a curb, and a rule. By comparing what is revealed in the New Testament with the Ten Commandments we see that God has basically repeated the Ten Commandments. This leads us to the conclusion that the Ten Commandments of the old covenant as far as they are repeated in the New Testament are an expression of God’s holy immutable will and in this sense can be said to apply to us today. To try to summarize this: we cannot say that the Ten Commandments apply to us because they are found in the old covenant. The old covenant no longer applies to us. We can say that the Ten Commandments apply to us because they are an expression of God's holy immutable will and only in so far as they are an expression of that will. And the only way in which we can tell if they are an expression of that will is by comparing them with the New Testament.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

We are privileged to live in the time of the new covenant. Not only that, we are privileged to be ministers of that new covenant. We have the privilege of knowing and telling others that all sin has been forgiven through the work of our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus’ blood shed on the cross established the new covenant confirming for us the forgiveness of sins. May we ever be found faithful ministers of the new covenant!

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