

## COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

In a previous article on Covenant Theology I showed you that the whole of the Bible is centred in the idea of covenant. The various covenants are the foundation upon which all that takes place rests. For example, you cannot understand the politics of a country unless you know the constitution upon which it rests. So we are going to see how the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants influence the history of the people of God and are the background to the statements of the prophets.

The essence of the covenant relationship is the promise, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people.' In each covenant there were more specific promises with corresponding responsibilities. Ultimately the promises were unconditional, in the sense that God would guarantee their fulfilment. But those with whom God entered into a covenant relationship were given their clear responsibilities, and failure to fulfil these would bring severe consequences.

### 1. NOAH

The promise – "The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (Genesis 9:15).

Noah was given the original creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply (9:1).

There are few further references to this covenant in the Scriptures, although there are many references to the Flood. In Isaiah 54:9 God wants to assure His people that He will return to them in great compassion with everlasting love (verses 7-8). He says it is like the promise He swore to Noah that the waters "should no more go over the earth". Both are promises that God guarantees with an oath! See also 2 Peter 3:4-7. There must not be another destructive Flood so that God's purposes of redemption can be fulfilled.

### 2. ABRAHAM

The promise – "You shall be a father of many nations ... I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:5,8).

On Abraham's side there was the command to circumcise all males (17:9-14).

The lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, can each be seen as a test of their faith in the covenant promises. They had been promised a multitude of descendants but Abraham had to wait 25 years for the first child/son to be born; then Isaac's wife was barren, as also was Jacob's wife Rachel. They only gave birth after prayer.

The Patriarchs had been promised the land of Canaan, yet it was a land of famine, a land subject to invasion, and by the time he died Abraham only had a burial place to call his own (Genesis 25:9-10). The great famine came and the entire family of Jacob went to live in a foreign land, Egypt. Here they became slaves and the Pharaoh's plan was to kill all male children (Exodus 1:15-22). If so, then God's covenant promise would fail. What would God do? Why would He do anything? "God heard their groaning, and **God remembered His covenant** with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exodus 2:24). Again and again God

declares that He will act to redeem them from Egyptian bondage and bring back into the land of Canaan because of His covenant promises (see Exodus 6:2-9, Deuteronomy 1:8, 9:5).

In the incident of the golden calf Moses pleads with God not to destroy the people on the basis of His promise to the Patriarchs (Exodus 32:11-14).

The people were protected and provided for during the wilderness wanderings, so that they could enter the land, because of the covenant promises (Psalm 105:39-42, see verses 8-11).

It was on the basis of these covenant promises that God re-established the covenant in the plains of Moab before entering the promised land (Deuteronomy 29:10-15).

The conquest of the land of Canaan was a fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham. David celebrates this in 1 Chronicles 16:15-18, also Nehemiah 9:7-8

Why was God so patient with His unfaithful people? Although they were justly oppressed by other nations He did not destroy them “because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (2 Kings 13:23).

The prophet Micah looks forward to future blessing, ultimately the new covenant, and proclaims that this is God’s faithfulness, His steadfast love to Abraham (7:18-20).

Mary, in her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), because of the Son in her womb, rejoices in the remembrance of God’s mercy, “as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring for ever” (verse 55). Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in his prophecy (Luke 1:68-79), knew that his son would “go before the Lord” (verse 76). This “Lord” Jesus would be the Saviour, the fruit of “the oath that He swore to our Father Abraham” (verse 73).

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the promise of an offspring to Abraham (Acts 3:25, Galatians 3:16). If we belong to Christ by faith then we are also Abraham’s offspring (Galatians 3:29). Christ was crucified so that “the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Galatians 3:14).

So, the history from the time of Abraham to the coming of Christ must be considered in the light of the promises made to Abraham.

### 3. MOSES

The promise – “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

There were conditions to enjoying the blessings of the covenant, and there were curses upon disobedience, as detailed in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

There was the specific sign of the sabbath (Exodus 31:12-17), and it is actually called the covenant (verse 16). So in the life of the people of Israel, and especially in their disobedience, there is emphasis on the sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-22, Isaiah 56:2,4,6, 58:13-14, Jeremiah 17:19-27).

The history of the nation of Israel is to be viewed from the perspective of their obedience or disobedience to the law of God given them on Mount Sinai in the covenant. When they obeyed they experienced the blessings of Deuteronomy 28:1-14. When they disobeyed they experienced the curses of the covenant as in Deuteronomy 28:15-68. The ultimate curse was to be expelled from the land of Canaan, which is what happened when their sin was incurable.

Why was the northern kingdom of Israel sent into exile in 722 B.C.? Because “they rejected His statutes and His **covenant** that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols” (2 Kings 17:15, see verses 34-40). “Then the king of Assyria carried Israel away captive to Assyria, ... because they did not obey the

voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed His **covenant** *and* all that Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded” (2 Kings 18:11-12).

Why did Elijah prophecy a drought? Because this was one of the curses of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). Whenever the prophets speak of judgements we must see them as an outworking of the covenant curses. So Jeremiah spoke in chapter 11 of his prophecy.

The great reformation that took place in the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23) was occasioned by the discovery of the Book of the Covenant, which was probably Deuteronomy or a part of it (23:2). They sought to do all that was commanded, especially keeping the Passover, which had not been so kept since the days of Samuel (2 Chronicles 35:18).

Why did the southern kingdom of Judah experience exile at last? “Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God” (Jeremiah 22:9).

Despite the greatness of their sin the Lord promised they would return to the land. Why? Because He is a covenant keeping God (Leviticus 26:44-45). This is the idea behind the word translated ‘steadfast love’ (ESV), *chesed* in Hebrew (Nehemiah 9:32).

What is the relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants? The law, the Mosaic covenant was “added because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19). It was added to the covenant made with Abraham to guarantee the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, by keeping the people separate from the nations around them through the law. But it was only until “the offspring should come” which is Christ (see verse 16). So the Mosaic covenant with the people of Israel was from the time of Moses until the coming of Christ. It was our guardian until Christ came (verses 24-25). Hebrews makes it quite clear that the Mosaic covenant is ‘old’ and is no longer in force (see 8:13). There was nothing wrong with the covenant itself but it had no power to make the people “continue in my covenant” (8:9). Note: This does not mean that laws such as the Ten Commandments are no longer in force.

#### **4. DAVID**

The promise – “Your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you” (2 Samuel 7:16).

Although there was the command to obey the law, there was also the unconditional promise never to take back this covenant. “If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took *it* from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you” (2 Samuel 7:14-16).

The reign of Solomon was the initial fulfilment of the covenant with David (1 Kings 8:22-26). Note: We must learn to turn God’s covenant promises into petitions for God to do what He has said.

Why did the kingdom not end when Solomon sinned and did not keep the covenant? “For the sake of My servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen” (1 Kings 11:13).

There were many unfaithful kings in the southern kingdom of Judah. Why was God so patient, so unwilling to destroy it? “Yet the LORD would not destroy the house of David, because of the covenant that He had made with David, and since He had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever” (2 Chronicles 21:7, see also 1 Kings 11:36, 15:4).

Psalms 89 is penned because it seemed that the Lord has “renounced the covenant of Your servant” (verse 39). The first 39 verses detail the covenant with David. The last 14 verses complain that God seems to “cast off and rejected ... your anointed” (verse 38).

It is true that there were no official kings in Judah from the time of the exile. But the king that David was promised did come – the Lord Jesus Christ, read Luke 1:32,69, 2:4,11, John 7:42, Acts 13:34-36, 15:16, Revelation 3:7, 5:5, 22:16. He sits on David’s throne for ever!

## **5. NEW**

The promise – “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 neighbour, 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 31:33-34).

There are no conditions to this new covenant. It guarantees that all in the covenant will “walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules” (Ezekiel 36:27). This is because, instead of being written on stone, God’s law is now written on the heart. That was the problem with the old covenant, it had no power to give obedience. All it could do was to condemn those who broke it (so Romans 3:20).

Through the sacrifice of Christ (His blood) this new covenant has been established (Matthew 26:28, Hebrews 9:15-22, 12:24, 13:20).

Rejoice that if you are in Christ you are under this new covenant. What does it mean for you?

- ✓ God’s law is now in your mind and written on your heart. This is the same law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. You understand it and love it and want to keep it.
- ✓ God is your God and you belong to His people.
- ✓ You know God personally in Christ and by the Spirit.
- ✓ Your sins are all forgiven, never to be remembered by God so as to act against you.

Praise the Lord!