

Know Your Faith – The Covenants

Sunday 26th October 2025

St. John's, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 119:97-105, Job 33:12-18; Hebrews 1:1-4; Ephesians 4:11-16

Question: What is the difference between a covenant and a contract?

We are continuing to examine key aspects and understandings of the Christian faith so we are able to talk about it with people in an intelligent and informed manner. This morning we are going to talk about Covenants.

The concept of a covenant is a fundamental one in Biblical thinking. There is an important distinction to be made between a contract and a covenant. When we talk about a contract we tend to think of a business transaction. A contract sets out the terms and conditions between two or more parties. Contracts are considered “legally binding” whether they be oral or written. Contracts also set out, in detail, penalties when one party or the other breaks the contract. In essence, a contract has a focus on its punitive, or punishing, effect, on an errant party to ensure they maintain their relationship. At heart contracts are about enforcement and protecting an individual and their wealth. As such, contracts are enforceable by law.

Covenants are quite different although they too, in some forms, are enforceable by law. The emphasis is reflected in the Latin the term *con venire* which means a “coming together”. At heart, a covenant is quite different in that it presupposes good-will between two parties and a growing faithfulness. Unlike a contract a covenant is not necessarily broken or their relationship ended when one of the parties fails. Covenants recognise that even if one party falls short, the other or both, may persevere with the goal of eventual reconciliation. As you will have picked up the core of a covenant is relational, from the heart and looks for long term good.

For this reason, we don't talk about a marriage contract we talk about a marriage covenant. It might give you some pause to wonder what a pre-nuptial agreement is saying in its very existence! Personally, I'm not in favour of pre-nuptial agreements because they are contracts and about self-interest rather than communal good.

A covenant will often include encouragements to do good and rewards for doing so. A covenant can also include penalties or consequences for failure, but it also has the promise of restoration at some point in the future. Again, the overall perspective is one that looks too good. Anyone who has been married longer than the honeymoon period knows that the approach a covenant takes is much more suitable for marriage than a contract! Covenants are at heart relational and looking for good out into the future. In the ancient world, within and outside Judaism, because of the intensely relational commitment involved covenants were considered to be of the most important, binding and sacred of oaths or agreements and were normally ratified by

blood. This took various forms. In the Hebrew world it was normally by the sacrifice of an animal before God to signify the commitment to costly action.

From the earliest times God established a number of covenants with humanity. Just how many and which ones are the more significant is debated by theologians but to give you an idea we will look at a few briefly this morning.

Adamic Covenant The first covenant was with Adam and Eve. Some call this the Adamic covenant. The Edenic Covenant promised blessings and a wonderful life in the garden of Eden walking with God. All Adam and Eve were asked to do was to avoid eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequences of doing so were severe, leading to ejection from the garden of Eden, work or toil and pain in different situations. Because of the covenantal nature of God's relationship with Adam and Eve there was also the hope of a future Redeemer and a restoration of humanity following their fall. The blood sacrifice to maintain the relationship here would be made by the Redeemer. This is foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15: One would come who would crush the enemy, the deceiver of mankind, and restitution for sin would be made. This was possible because one party, in this case God, remained faithful to the covenant and so there was hope, and there is hope, for the future.

Noahic Covenant As time went by covenants became more explicit and reveal more of eth nature and plan of God. The next covenant was the one that God made with Noah. As we know in Noah's time the people had become completely rebellious against God. God became frustrated with mankind and determined to destroy it and start again. I remember Ray Ching, the famous NZ bird artist, once saying that if he made a mistake, he'd turn it into something else; a branch, a twig, a leaf or something else altogether but keep the main purpose and subject the same. When God saw the state of the earth God did something different. Looking around God saw that Noah was a righteous man, the only righteous man left. God's covenant with humanity and His justice required that Noah could not be destroyed with all the rest. God kept the one positive aspect and wiped the slate clean, so to speak, to restart with Noah and his family. After placing Noah and his family in an incredible ark the world was destroyed by way of flood. After the flood receded God made a covenant with Noah promising never again to destroy the earth by means of a flood. As we know the classic sign of this covenant is the rainbow. But there is more to this covenant. God blessed Noah and his off-spring, instructing them to go out and fill the earth with their descendants. God also established the first very clear laws including a prohibition on murder; on the shedding of human blood.

The great problem of humanity of course is our potential for sin. Over time humanity spread out across the face of the earth. But, very few followed in the ways of God. Sadly, the shedding of human blood was all too common. Now it wasn't God's intent to indulge in some sort of Groundhog Day were God keeps resetting until humanity

finally gets it right. God had promised Noah he wouldn't destroy the earth by flood again.

To further the Covenant God chose to call for Himself a people, to be set up as an example to all of humanity, as to how to live. To do this God called Abraham, a Canaanite, from an idol worshipping family in Ur of the Chaldees, to be the first founding father of his people. Abram, who became Abraham and his wife Sarah were faithful servants who were blessed and successful in every way; except they had no children, no heirs.

Abrahamic Covenant The Covenant that God made with Abraham is one of the most important covenants that has been made. It is foundational to the thinking of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In essence, what God promised Abraham can be summarised in three key points: Firstly, Abraham, a man with no children in his old age would be, even so, the father of a great nation. His descendants would be like the stars in the night sky by number. Secondly, Abraham and his descendants would inherit the Promised Land. That is the land of Canaan, populated by seven other nations that the Hebrew people were to drive from the land. One can see how this has become an historical issue that will not easily go away in today's political context. Thirdly, all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. The requirement for Abraham and his descendants was that they would follow the Way of God and make a symbolic commitment in the act of ritual circumcision.

In the dramatic making of this covenant we see that Abraham was actually asleep part of the time! God was committing His own person to the fulfilment of the promises. The fire passing over the offering was a symbol of the cleansing and purification that will at some time come.

The **Mosaic Covenant** took yet another step forward in God's revelation to humanity and setting the expectations of how we need to be. When Moses went up Mt Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments the people were had come out of hundreds of years of captivity in Babylon and were rebellious against Moses and God. The commandments Moses received, in fact the whole compendium of the Hebrew Torah, showed people what good behaviour was in the eyes of the Lord and what was required of them in keeping their hearts focussed properly. Sadly, even this was corrupted before many generations went by. The Law, as the apostle Paul would later point out, shows us what is sinful in God's eyes and what we should not do in our action. The Torah is a legal code of moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that carry with them the promise of blessings for obedience and curses or consequences for disobedience. In the Law the sacrificial system is described, which provides a temporary atonement for sin in the promise of the coming Redeemer, the Messiah, who will pay the ultimate price for sin. The Mosaic Covenant also provided Israel with a priestly system by which the nation and individuals could approach God. Most of

all Paul says, the Covenant Law brings us to the realisation of the Holiness of God and what that means.

Within the words of the prophets is a promise of an **Everlasting Covenant**. Jeremiah writes (32:38,40) **"They shall be My people, and I will be their God. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from Me."** Ezekiel writes (Ezekiel 36:26,27;37:26) **"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments, and do them. Moreover, I will make a covenant of peace with them: it shall be an everlasting covenant with them."**

Central to the Everlasting Covenant is that God will put right the hearts of men and women, restoring the fulness of relationship that we can have with God by the Spirit. This is achieved by God pouring a new heart and spirit into us. One that is attuned to truth and to listening to His voice over the clamour of the world so that we are able to walk according to the ways of God. This heart, this spirit living within us is eternal.

The **New Covenant** was established by Jesus as long promised in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 31. We celebrate this every Communion when we hear the words, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."** The **New Covenant** is inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection. It is the fulfilment of what is necessary for the Everlasting Covenant to come into effect: that is sin has been dealt with for all who will come to God. As Paul points out in Romans 6:14-15, because of this we are no longer under the Law but under Grace. The Old Covenant has served its purpose and has been, according to Hebrews 7:22, replaced by **"a better covenant"**. Because of this covenant we can individually receive salvation as a free gift (Ephesians 2:9-9). Our part is now to exercise faith in Christ. We can also receive the life-giving Holy Spirit who lives in all believers (Romans 8:9-11) and we share in the inheritance of Christ, enjoying a permanent, unbroken relationship with God (Hebrews 9:15).

The final covenant we must mention is the Davidic Covenant that we will see fulfilled when Jesus returns. Detailed in 2 Samuel 7 the Davidic Covenant promises the Messiah will come from David's line, as Jesus did and that his descendants would rule over the people of Israel forever, with his dynasty and kingdom never permanently ending.

So to conclude, what is the point of the covenants? The covenants demonstrate God's commitment to establish a permanent personal relationship with humanity and us individually. The covenants provide a framework of God's self-revelation and demonstrate God's commitment to us irrespective of our responsiveness at any given

point in time – personally or as nations. Through the covenants God demonstrates how He intends to accomplish His plan through time with the ultimate goal of restoring us in that relationship with Him. The covenants also demonstrate the character of God in His faithfulness, perseverance, guidance and power. Keeping the covenant also demonstrates the type of people we are to be. Ultimately, our keeping covenant with God ensures we will inherit the blessings God offers. Ultimately, the covenants should be a great encouragement to us as they show how hard God has worked so that you can have an alive relationship with Him today and eternally. So be it!

Amen