HE SWORE BY HIMSELF

The Covenants of God, from Noah to the New Covenant, and What They Mean for Israel and the Church



From the rainbow to the cross, God has never broken His word.

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TRINFINITY
Enterprises

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Before You Begin

> *And you shall know that the LORD your God, He **is** God, the faithful God, who keeps the covenant and the steadfast love to those who love Him and to those who keep His commandments, to a thousand generations*
>
> Deuteronomy 7:9 (SLB)

Most of us make promises every day. We tell a friend we will call back. We tell our kids we will be at the game. We sign a loan, say wedding vows, shake hands on a deal. Some of those promises we keep. Some we don't. Even the best of us have broken a few.

I wrote this book to trace the single thread that holds the whole Bible together. Read literally, Scripture shows God binding Himself to His promises, including His unfinished promises to Israel and His New Covenant grace to the Church. Our assurance rests on this: God keeps His word even when people fail.

God has never broken one. Not once.

That is what this book is about. From Genesis to Revelation, God binds Himself to people with promises He calls covenants. He made one with Noah after the flood. He made one with Abraham under the night sky. He made one with Israel at Mount Sinai, with David about his throne, and finally, through Jesus, He made a new covenant written on the heart. If you want to understand the Bible as one story instead of sixty-six separate books, the covenants are the place to start. They are the beams that hold up the whole house.

Why This Book Matters

I wrote this book for three reasons.

First, the covenants show us who God is. A covenant is God putting His own name and honor on the line. When we see how He keeps His word to Noah, to Abraham, and to David, over thousands of years and through every kind of failure on our side, we learn that He will keep His word to us too.

Second, the covenants make the Bible make sense. Why did God choose one family? Why did He give Israel a land and a law? Why do Christians not offer animal sacrifices? Why did Jesus say, at His last meal, that the cup was the new covenant in His blood? Every one of those questions is answered by the covenants.

Third, the covenants explain what God is still going to do. God made promises to Israel that have not been fully kept yet: a land, a King on David's throne, a nation made new. I believe God will keep every one of them, to the letter, and that He has also brought people from every nation into the blessing of Abraham through Jesus. That is why I hold that Israel and the church are not the same thing, and why I believe the church will be caught up to meet the Lord before the seven years of tribulation. Part Four lays that out carefully and fairly, including the views of Christians who see it differently.

How the Book Is Laid Out

Part One: What a Covenant Is explains the word, how covenants worked in the ancient world, and how the covenants of the Bible fit together.

Part Two: The Covenants in the Old Testament walks through each covenant in Bible order: the first promise in the garden, Noah, Abraham, Sinai, the feasts God built into Israel's year, the land, a few smaller covenants, David, the long story of Israel's failure and God's faithfulness, and the promise of a new covenant.

Part Three: Jesus and the New Covenant shows how Jesus kept and fulfilled every covenant, what the new covenant gives us, what the hard warnings in Hebrews mean, how the law and grace fit together, and how Gentiles were brought near.

Part Four: Israel, the Church, and the Days Ahead asks whether God is finished with Israel, sets out the three main ways Christians read the covenants, shows why the covenants matter for the Rapture and the end times, looks ahead to the day every promise is kept, answers the questions people ask most often, and closes with what all of this means for you.

At the back you will find a chart of the covenants at a glance, a list of words to know, a timeline, a 30-day reading plan, notes for group leaders, a list of sources, and an index of every Bible verse cited, with page numbers.

Every chapter ends with **Study Questions** for your own reading or for a small group.

A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations in this book come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words set in bold italics inside a quotation are words added in English to make the sentence read clearly. When I don't quote a passage, I give the reference so you can read it for yourself, and I hope you will. Don't take my word for anything in this book. Open your Bible and check it, the way the Bereans did in Acts 17:11.

The SLB, like most English Bibles, prints God's personal name as LORD in capital letters. When you see LORD that way, the Hebrew behind it is the name God gave Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14-15).

I capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside a Scripture quotation, I leave the capitals exactly as the translation prints them.

Bible scholars use many labels for the covenants, and they do not all count them the same way. I use the plain names: the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant at Sinai (also called the Mosaic covenant or the law), the land covenant, the covenant with David, and the new covenant. Where other teachers use other names, I tell you so.

Part One: What a Covenant Is

Chapter 1: What Is a Covenant?

> *For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater by whom to swear, He swore by Himself*
>
> Hebrews 6:13 (SLB)

There was a time in this country when a handshake still meant something. A man's word was his bond, and if he broke it, everyone in town knew. Today we put everything in writing, and we still end up in court. People have always needed a way to make a promise solid, a way to say, "This one counts. You can build your life on this."

At 16 I aced the Air Force testing and passed my high school proficiency exam early. They had promised me a computer job, but when it came time to sign, they would not give it to me, so I walked away. My wife, on the other hand, has kept her vows to me for 36 years, even through seasons I did not deserve it. Human agreements break down. God's covenants stand in a class by themselves.

In the Bible, that way is called a covenant.

The Words the Bible Uses

The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for covenant is **berith** (say it beh-REETH). It appears close to three hundred times in the Old Testament. It is used for agreements between people, like the covenant between Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 18:3), for treaties between nations, like the one Joshua made with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:15), and for a marriage (Malachi 2:14). Most of all, it is used for the promises God made with people.

The New Testament was written in Greek. The Greek word is **diatheke** (say it dee-ah-THAY-kay). In everyday Greek it could mean a last will and testament, the kind of document that takes effect when someone dies. The writer of Hebrews uses that double meaning on purpose, as we will see in Chapter 17 (Hebrews 9:15-17).

So a simple definition might be this:

A covenant is a solemn, binding promise that sets up a relationship, sealed by an oath and often by a sign, with blessings for faithfulness and consequences for breaking it.

Notice the word relationship. A covenant is not just a contract about goods and money. It is about belonging. When God makes a covenant, the heart of it is usually some form of these words: I will be your God, and you will be My people (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Revelation 21:3).

Cutting a Covenant

Here is something you will not notice in many English Bibles. The Hebrew Bible almost never says that someone made a covenant. It says they **cut** a covenant. The SLB keeps that wording in many places.

> *On that day the LORD cut a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:"* (Genesis 15:18)

Why cut? Because in the ancient world, covenants were often sealed with blood. Animals were killed and cut in two, and the people making the covenant walked between the pieces. The message was hard to miss: may what happened to these animals happen to me if I break my word. God Himself describes this practice in Jeremiah, when the leaders of Judah broke a covenant they had made.

> *And I will make the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not carried out the words of the covenant which they made before Me,* ***like*** *the calf which they cut in two and passed between its pieces* (Jeremiah 34:18)

Keep that picture in mind. It will matter a great deal when we come to the night God made His covenant with Abraham in Chapter 6.

The Parts of a Covenant

Not every covenant in the Bible has all of these parts, but most have several of them.

- **The parties.** Who is making the covenant, and with whom. Sometimes it is between equals. More often, in the Bible, it is between God and people, and nobody is equal to God.
- **The promises.** What each side commits to. In some covenants only God makes promises. In others, the people make promises too.
- **The oath.** A solemn word that binds the speaker. When God swears an oath, Hebrews tells us He swears by Himself, since there is no one greater (Hebrews 6:13-18).
- **The sign.** Something people can see that reminds both sides of the covenant: the rainbow for Noah, circumcision for Abraham, the Sabbath for Israel at Sinai, and the cup of the Lord's Supper for the new covenant.
- **The blessings and the consequences.** What happens if the covenant is kept, and what happens if it is broken.
- **The witnesses and the record.** Ancient covenants were often written down and witnessed. Moses wrote down the words of the covenant at Sinai and read them to the people (Exodus 24:4-7). Later, he called heaven and earth as witnesses (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Covenants in the Ancient World

God did not invent a strange new idea when He made covenants. He used a form people already understood. Archaeologists have found many treaties from the ancient Near East, especially from the Hittite empire, which ruled much of what is now Turkey in the centuries before and around the time of Moses. A great king, called a suzerain (say it SOO-zer-in), would make a treaty with a smaller king, called a vassal.

These treaties usually followed a pattern. They named the great king. They told the history of what he had done for the smaller king. They listed what the smaller king must do. They said the treaty must be stored and read in public. They called on witnesses. And they listed blessings for keeping the treaty and curses for breaking it.

Many scholars have pointed out how closely the book of Deuteronomy follows this same pattern. It opens with who God is and what He has done (Deuteronomy 1 to 4), lists what Israel must do (Deuteronomy 5 to 26), calls for the law to be kept and read in public (Deuteronomy 31:9-13), calls heaven and earth as witnesses (Deuteronomy 30:19), and closes with blessings and curses (Deuteronomy 28). The scholar George Mendenhall first drew wide attention to this in the 1950s, and Kenneth Kitchen later showed that the Bible's form fits the treaties of the second millennium B.C. especially well.

I do not want to make too much of this. Scholars still debate how close the match is and what it tells us about dating. But it is a helpful piece of background. It tells us that when God spoke to Israel at Sinai, He spoke in a form a people coming out of Egypt would understand. He was the great King. They were His people. And He had already rescued them before He ever asked them to obey.

Two Kinds of Covenants

Bible teachers often sort the covenants of God into two kinds. Not everyone uses these labels, but they help.

Conditional covenants depend on both sides keeping their part. The covenant at Sinai is the clearest example. God said, "if you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant," then Israel would be His treasured possession (Exodus 19:5). The blessings of that covenant depended on Israel's obedience, and Israel broke it again and again.

Unconditional covenants depend on God alone. God makes the promise, God swears the oath, and God guarantees the result. Human failure can delay the blessing, or keep a particular generation from enjoying it, but it cannot cancel the promise. The covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David are usually placed here, along with the new covenant.

Some teachers prefer the words **royal grant** for the unconditional kind, because ancient kings sometimes gave land or a dynasty to a faithful servant as a gift that could not be taken back. Others point out that even God's unconditional covenants expect faith and obedience from the people who enjoy them. That is true. Abraham was told to walk before God and be blameless (Genesis 17:1). David's sons were warned that sin would bring discipline (2 Samuel 7:14). But the promise itself rested on God's oath, not on their perfect record.

That difference is the key to the whole Bible. If the promises of God depended on us, they would have failed long ago. They do not. They depend on Him.

Why God Makes Covenants at All

Here is a question worth asking. Why would God need to make a covenant? He is God. He does not need to bind Himself to anyone. His word alone is enough.

The answer is not that God needs covenants. It is that we do. Hebrews says God guaranteed His promise with an oath because He wanted to show the heirs of the promise how unchangeable His purpose is.

> *In which God, desiring more abundantly to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, guaranteed **it** by an oath, so that through two unchangeable*

> *things, in which **it is** impossible **for** God to lie, we who have fled for refuge may have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope being set before **us*** (Hebrews 6:17-18)

God made covenants for the same reason a loving father looks his child in the eye and says, “I promise.” The promise does not make the father more trustworthy. It helps the child trust him. God stoops down to our level and puts His promises in a form we can hold onto, so that we may have strong encouragement.

Study Questions

1. Think of a promise someone made to you that they kept, and one they broke. How did each one affect your trust in that person?
2. In your own words, what is the difference between a covenant and an ordinary contract?
3. Why do you think the Bible speaks of cutting a covenant? What did the animals cut in two say about the person making the promise?
4. Read Exodus 19:4-6. What had God already done for Israel before He asked them to keep His covenant? Why does that order matter?
5. What is the difference between a conditional and an unconditional covenant? Which kind would you rather your hope rest on, and why?
6. Read Hebrews 6:13-18. Why did God swear an oath to Abraham? What does that tell you about how God sees our need for assurance?

Chapter 2: How the Covenants Fit Together

> *that you were at that time apart from Christ, having been alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise, not having hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ.*
>
> Ephesians 2:12-13 (SLB)

When you first look at the covenants of the Bible, they can feel like a pile of separate deals: one with Noah, one with Abraham, one with Moses, one with David, and then a new one with Jesus. But they are not separate. They build on each other like the floors of a house. Each one adds something, and none of them cancels the promises God made before.

Paul calls them "the covenants of the promise" (Ephesians 2:12). Notice the plural, covenants, and the singular, promise. There are several covenants, but there is one great promise running through all of them: God will make a people for Himself, bless the whole world through them, and live with them forever under His King.

The Covenants at a Glance

Here is the big picture. Each of these gets its own chapter in Part Two.

Covenant	Made with	Main promise	Sign	Kind
Noah	Noah, his family, every living creature	Never again a flood to destroy all life; seasons will continue	The rainbow	Unconditional
Abraham	Abraham and his seed through Isaac and Jacob	A land, a great nation, and blessing for all families of the earth	Circumcision	Unconditional
Sinai (Mosaic)	Israel at Mount Sinai	Israel as God's treasured people, blessed for obedience, disciplined for disobedience	The Sabbath	Conditional
Land	Israel on the plains of Moab	Scattering for disobedience, then a regathering and a new heart	None named	Unconditional in its final promise
David	David and his house	A son on David's throne, a house and a kingdom forever	None named	Unconditional
New	Israel and Judah, opened to all who believe	Forgiveness, the law on the heart, the Spirit within, knowing God	The cup of the Lord's Supper	Unconditional

One Promise, Unfolding

Think of it this way. In the garden, right after the first sin, God promised that a Son of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). We are not told yet who He will be or how He will do it. All we know is that He is coming.

With Noah, God promised to preserve the earth long enough for that Son to come. The seasons will keep turning. The world will not be wiped out again by water (Genesis 8:22; 9:11).

With Abraham, God narrowed the promise to one family. The Son will come from Abraham's seed, and through Him every family on earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Galatians 3:16).

At Sinai, God gave that family a law, a priesthood, and a tabernacle. The law showed what God is like and what sin is, and the sacrifices pointed ahead to a better sacrifice to come (Galatians 3:24; Hebrews 10:1).

In the land covenant, God told Israel ahead of time that they would fail and be scattered, and promised that He would bring them back and change their hearts (Deuteronomy 30:1-6).

With David, God narrowed the promise again, to one royal line. The Son will be a King from David's house, and His kingdom will last forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

In the new covenant, God promised to do what the law could never do: forgive sin completely, write His law on the heart, and put His own Spirit inside His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

And then Jesus came. He is the Son of the woman, the Seed of Abraham, the One the law pointed to, the Son of David, and the Mediator of the new covenant. Paul says every promise of God finds its yes in Him.

> *For as many as **are the** promises of God, in Him **is** the Yes, and in Him the Amen, to God for glory through us.* (2 Corinthians 1:20)

What About Adam?

You may have noticed that my chart starts with Noah, not Adam. That is because the Bible first uses the word covenant for God's dealings with people in Noah's story (Genesis 6:18). Many teachers, though, speak of a covenant with Adam as well, and some build a great deal on it. I take that up in Chapter 3, because it is one of the places where Christians honestly differ.

Do Later Covenants Cancel Earlier Ones?

This is one of the most important questions in this whole book, so I want to answer it early.

Paul answers it for the covenant at Sinai. The law came 430 years after God's promise to Abraham, and Paul says the law did not cancel the promise.

> *Now this I say: a covenant confirmed beforehand by God toward Christ, the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance **is** by law, **it is** no longer by promise; but God has granted **it** to Abraham through promise.* (Galatians 3:17-18)

That principle holds for all the covenants. A later covenant can add to an earlier one, explain it, or bring part of it to completion, but it does not take back what God swore. God's promise to Noah still stands every time you see a rainbow. God's promise to Abraham still stands. God's promise to David still stands. The covenant at Sinai is a special case, because it was conditional and was always meant to be temporary,

and the New Testament says plainly that it has been replaced by the new covenant (Hebrews 8:13). We will look at that carefully in Chapters 9 and 17.

Who Are the Covenants For?

Here is where things get interesting, and where Christians have argued for a long time.

Most of the covenants in the Old Testament were made with Israel. The covenant with Abraham was with him and his seed. The covenant at Sinai was with the nation that came out of Egypt. The covenant with David was with his royal house. Even the new covenant, when Jeremiah first announced it, was promised "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31).

Yet the New Testament says that Gentiles, people who are not Jewish, now share in these blessings through Jesus. Paul told the Ephesians that they had once been strangers to the covenants of the promise, but now they had been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:12-13). He told the Galatians that if they belong to Christ, they are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

So how do the promises to Israel and the blessings for the church fit together? Has the church taken Israel's place? Or does God still have a future for Israel as a nation, alongside His work in the church? That question shapes how you read the Old Testament prophets, how you read Romans 9 to 11, and how you understand the end times. I will give my answer in Part Four, and I will give the other answers fairly too. For now, just keep the question in your pocket as we walk through the covenants one at a time.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Paul speaks of several covenants but one promise (Ephesians 2:12)? What is that one promise?
2. Look at the chart. Which covenant do you know the least about? What do you hope to learn?
3. How does each covenant narrow down where the promised Son will come from?
4. Read Galatians 3:15-18. Why can the law not cancel the promise God made to Abraham?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 1:20. Which promise of God means the most to you right now? How does it find its yes in Jesus?
6. Before reading Part Four, what do you think: are the promises to Israel and the blessings for the church the same thing, or different? Write down your answer so you can come back to it.

Part Two: The Covenants in the Old Testament

Chapter 3: The First Promise

> *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you **on the** head, and you shall bruise him **on the** heel.*
>
> Genesis 3:15 (SLB)

Before there was a rainbow, before there was an altar on a mountain, before there was a law written in stone, there was a garden. And in that garden, on the worst day in human history, God made the first promise of redemption.

Made to Belong to God

Genesis 1 and 2 show us a world made good, and a man and woman made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28). God gave them work to do, a garden to tend, and a whole world to fill and rule under Him. He gave them every tree for food but one, and He warned them that on the day they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

God was not a distant boss. He walked in the garden (Genesis 3:8). He brought the animals to the man to name (Genesis 2:19). He made the woman and brought her to the man (Genesis 2:22). Everything about those first chapters says that people were made to belong to God, to know Him, and to live in His presence.

That is the same relationship every later covenant aims at. When God says, at the very end of the Bible, that His dwelling is with people and He will be their God (Revelation 21:3), He is bringing back what was lost in Eden, and more.

Was There a Covenant with Adam?

The word covenant does not appear in Genesis 1 to 3. Even so, many Christians believe God's arrangement with Adam was a covenant. Here are the two main ways people see it.

The covenant of works. Teachers in the Reformed tradition, following the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646, chapter 7), speak of a covenant of works with Adam. In this view, God promised life to Adam on the condition of perfect obedience, with death as the penalty for disobedience. Adam stood for the whole human race, so when he fell, we all fell with him. Christ then came as the second Adam, who kept perfectly what Adam broke. People who hold this view often point to Hosea 6:7.

> *And they, like Adam, have overstepped **the** covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me.*
> (Hosea 6:7)

No formal covenant yet. Other teachers, including most dispensational teachers, agree that God gave Adam a command with a penalty, and that Adam stood for all of us. Paul says so plainly (Romans 5:12-19). But they hold back from calling it a covenant, since Genesis does not, and they point out that the Hebrew

of Hosea 6:7 can also be read “like men” or “at Adam,” a town near the Jordan (Joshua 3:16). Some of these teachers speak of an Edenic arrangement before the fall and an Adamic arrangement after it.

Here is where I land. The things everyone agrees on matter far more than the label. Adam was given a clear command. He broke it. Death came to all people through him. And God answered with a promise. Whether or not you call Eden a covenant, Romans 5 says the same thing either way: what Adam lost, Christ won back, and more.

> *So then, as through one trespass **it came** to all men for condemnation, so also through one righteous act **it came** to all men for justification of life. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were constituted sinners, so also through the obedience of the one the many will be constituted righteous.* (Romans 5:18-19)

The Worst Day and the First Promise

Genesis 3 tells the story. The serpent lied. The woman ate. The man ate with her. Their eyes were opened, and the first thing they did was hide from God.

God came looking for them anyway. He questioned the man, then the woman, then turned to the serpent. And in the middle of the curse on the serpent, He spoke a promise.

> *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you **on the** head, and you shall bruise him **on the** heel.* (Genesis 3:15)

Christians have long called this verse the **first gospel** (the old Latin name is protoevangelium, say it pro-toe-ee-van-JELL-ee-um). Look at what it says. There will be war between the serpent and the woman, and between their seed. One day a Seed of the woman, one person, called “he,” will bruise the serpent on the head. The serpent will bruise him on the heel. A wound to the heel hurts. A blow to the head is fatal.

The New Testament tells us who the serpent was (Revelation 12:9). And it tells us who the Seed is. Jesus was born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). He was wounded at the cross. And through His death He destroyed the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14). Paul even echoes Genesis 3:15 when he tells the believers in Rome that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet (Romans 16:20).

Grace Before the Door Closed

There are two more things in Genesis 3 I don’t want you to miss.

First, God clothed them. Adam and Eve had tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. God replaced those leaves with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21). The Bible does not explain that verse, so I will not stretch it. But it is hard not to notice that, for the first time, something died so that sinners could be covered, and God was the One who did it.

Second, God sent them out of the garden so they would not eat from the tree of life and live forever in their fallen state (Genesis 3:22-24). That was judgment, but it was also mercy. God did not want them locked forever in sin and death. He had a better plan, and the rest of the Bible is the story of that plan.

The tree of life shows up again on the last page of the Bible, in the city of God, open to everyone whose sins are washed away (Revelation 22:2, 14).

What This Means for the Covenants

Every covenant that follows grows out of Genesis 3:15. The covenant with Noah keeps the world alive so the Seed can come. The covenant with Abraham tells us the Seed's family. The covenant with David tells us His royal line. The new covenant tells us what His victory will do inside us.

God did not wait for people to clean themselves up before He made His first promise. He made it to two people standing in the wreckage of their own sin. That has been His way ever since.

Study Questions

1. What do Genesis 1 and 2 tell you about the kind of relationship God made people for?
2. Why do some Christians call God's arrangement with Adam a covenant, and why do others hold back? Does the label change anything important?
3. Read Genesis 3:15 slowly. What does it promise about the serpent? About the Seed of the woman?
4. How do Galatians 4:4, Hebrews 2:14, and Romans 16:20 help you see Jesus in Genesis 3:15?
5. What does it tell you about God that He made His first promise right after the first sin?
6. Read Revelation 22:1-5. How does the end of the Bible answer what was lost in the garden?

Chapter 4: The Covenant with Noah

> *And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will see it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living being among all flesh which **is** on the earth.*
>
> Genesis 9:16 (SLB)

Every time it rains and the sun breaks through, you have a chance to see a covenant sign hanging in the sky. Most people think of a rainbow as pretty. The Bible says it is a promise.

In project management, a milestone on the schedule is not there because we forgot the plan. It marks the time to act on it. When God says the rainbow will remind Him of His covenant (Genesis 9:14-16), it does not mean He forgets. When God remembers, it means He acts on what He already promised.

A World Gone Wrong

Genesis 6 paints a dark picture. People had filled the earth, and they had filled it with violence. The LORD saw that every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil all the day (Genesis 6:5). God was grieved in His heart that He had made man (Genesis 6:6), and He decided to bring a flood.

But one man found favor in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:8). Noah was not sinless. Genesis 9 shows us that clearly. But he walked with God (Genesis 6:9), and God chose to save him and his family.

The First Time the Word Appears

This is where the Bible first uses the word covenant for God's dealings with people. Before the flood came, God told Noah to build the ark, and then He said this:

> *And I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark, you and your sons and your wife and the wives of your sons with you.* (Genesis 6:18)

Notice the words My covenant. God was already planning what He would do after the waters went down. Noah was told to build. God was the One who promised to keep him.

After the Flood

When Noah came out of the ark, the first thing he did was build an altar and offer burnt offerings (Genesis 8:20). The LORD smelled the soothing aroma, and He made a decision in His heart.

> *And the LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to His heart, "I will not again curse the ground anymore because of mankind, for the inclination of the heart of mankind **is** evil from his youth; and I will not again strike down every living thing anymore, as I have done. All the days of the earth yet **to come**, seed and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."* (Genesis 8:21-22)

Read those words carefully, because they surprise people. God does not say He will never judge again because people have gotten better. He says He will hold back this kind of judgment even though the

intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. The covenant with Noah does not rest on human goodness. It rests on God's patience.

What God Promised

In Genesis 9, God spelled out the covenant. Here are its main parts.

- **Blessing and a fresh start.** God blessed Noah and his sons and told them, as He had told Adam, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1).
- **Food.** God gave them animals for food, as He had given them green plants, but they were not to eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood (Genesis 9:3-4).
- **The value of human life.** Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood will be shed, because God made man in His image (Genesis 9:5-6). Even after the flood, every human being still bears God's image, and murder is an attack on that image.
- **No more worldwide flood.** Never again will all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9:11).
- **A sign.** The rainbow in the cloud.

> *And God said, "This **is** the sign of the covenant which I am setting between Me and you and every living being that **is** with you, for everlasting generations: My bow I have set in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth."* (Genesis 9:12-13)

Who Is in This Covenant?

This covenant is wider than any other in the Bible. It was made with Noah and his sons, with their seed after them, and with every living creature that came out of the ark (Genesis 9:9-10). It covers every person alive today, believer or not, and every animal too. It is God's promise to the whole created world.

It is also unconditional. Noah did not have to sign anything. He did not have to promise anything. God made the promise and God set the sign. And God says the rainbow is for His own remembering, not only ours.

> *And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will see it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living being among all flesh which **is** on the earth.* (Genesis 9:16)

God does not forget. When the Bible says He remembers, it means He acts on His promise. Every rainbow is God saying, "I said I would hold back, and I am holding back."

Why This Covenant Still Matters

It is easy to skip past Noah's covenant as old news. Here are four reasons not to.

It explains why the world keeps going. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night have not stopped since Noah (Genesis 8:22). Every sunrise is God keeping His word. Jeremiah later uses that faithfulness as proof that God will keep His other covenants too (Jeremiah 33:20-21, 25-26). We will come back to that in Chapter 13.

It gives God's patience a purpose. God holds back final judgment so that people have time to repent. Peter says the Lord is not slow about His promise, but patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

It does not mean judgment will never come. God promised no more worldwide flood. He did not promise no more judgment. Jesus said the days before His return would be like the days of Noah, with people eating and drinking and marrying, until the flood came and took them all away (Matthew 24:37-39). Peter says the present heavens and earth are being kept for fire on the day of judgment (2 Peter 3:6-7). The rainbow is a promise of patience, not a promise that sin will be ignored.

It shows God's heart for the whole world. Before God ever chose Abraham, He made a covenant with every nation on earth. The God of the Bible is not a tribal god. He is the Maker and Keeper of all people.

A Rainbow Around the Throne

The rainbow shows up again near the end of the Bible. When John was caught up to heaven, he saw a throne, and around the throne was a rainbow, like an emerald in appearance (Revelation 4:3). Ezekiel saw something similar (Ezekiel 1:28). Right before the judgments of Revelation begin, God lets us see that His throne is still circled by the sign of His mercy.

I find that comforting. Whatever comes on the earth, the One on the throne is the same God who promised Noah He would be patient, and He has kept that promise for thousands of years.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 8:21. Why did God promise not to destroy the earth again by a flood? What does that tell you about the basis of this covenant?
2. Who is included in God's covenant with Noah? Why does that matter for how we see people who don't know God?
3. Genesis 9:6 says human life is precious because people are made in God's image. How should that shape the way we treat others?
4. Why do you think God says the rainbow helps Him remember? What does it mean when God remembers?
5. How do Matthew 24:37-39 and 2 Peter 3:3-10 show that the covenant with Noah is a promise of patience, not a promise that judgment will never come?
6. The next time you see a rainbow, what will you think about?

Chapter 5: The Covenant with Abraham: The Promise

> *And the LORD said to Abram, "Go for yourself from your land and from your kindred and from the house of your father, to the land which I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great; and be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who disdains you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*
>
> Genesis 12:1-3 (SLB)

After the flood, people tried once more to make a name for themselves without God. They built a city and a tower at Babel, and God scattered them over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9). The next chapter opens with a very different kind of name-making. This time God says He will make a man's name great, and He will do it by His own promise.

Called Out of Ur

Abram, later renamed Abraham, came from Ur of the Chaldeans, a wealthy city in what is now southern Iraq (Genesis 11:31). His family worshiped other gods. Joshua told Israel so plainly many years later (Joshua 24:2). Abram did not go looking for the LORD. The LORD came to him.

God told him to leave his land, his kindred, and his father's house, and go to a land God would show him. He did not tell him where. Hebrews says Abraham went out not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8). That is faith: taking God at His word before you can see where the road goes.

Three Promises in One

Read Genesis 12:1-3 again and you will see that God's promise to Abram has three main parts. Bible teachers sum them up as land, seed, and blessing.

Land. "To the land which I will show you." When Abram reached Canaan, the LORD appeared to him and said, "To your seed I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). Later God gave its borders: from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

Seed. "I will make you into a great nation." Abram and Sarai were old and had no children, yet God promised a family as many as the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16) and the stars of the sky (Genesis 15:5). The word seed in Hebrew, like the English word, can mean one descendant or many. That will matter in Chapter 19.

Blessing. "I will bless you and make your name great." And then the promise reaches out past Abram's own family: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." God chose one man not to ignore the nations, but to reach them.

There is also a warning built into the promise. "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who disdains you I will curse." God would treat the way people treated Abram's family as the way they treated Him.

Why One Family?

People sometimes ask whether it was fair for God to choose one family. Wouldn't it be better to work with everyone at once?

The Bible's answer is that God chose one family for the sake of everyone. From Babel onward, the nations had gone their own way. So God started over, the way a gardener starts with one seed. Through that one family He would give the world His word, His prophets, and finally His Son. Paul says this was the gospel preached ahead of time.

> *And the Scripture, having foreseen that God justifies the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham: "In you all the nations will be blessed."* (Galatians 3:8)

Notice what Paul says. When God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed in him, He was already planning to bring Gentiles to Himself by faith. The covenant with Abraham was never meant to keep the world out. It was meant to bring the world in.

Counted as Righteous

Years passed, and Abram still had no son. He wondered out loud whether his servant Eliezer would be his heir. God took him outside at night and told him to count the stars, if he could. "So will your seed be" (Genesis 15:5). And then comes one of the most important verses in the whole Bible.

> *And he believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him **as** righteousness.* (Genesis 15:6)

Abram had not been circumcised yet. The law of Moses would not come for centuries. Abram had not done anything except believe God. And God counted his faith as righteousness.

Paul builds his whole explanation of the gospel on this verse (Romans 4:1-5, 9-12; Galatians 3:6-9). Abraham was declared right with God by faith, before circumcision and before the law, so that he could be the father of all who believe, Jew or Gentile. If you trust Jesus today, you are standing on the same ground Abraham stood on that night under the stars.

A Promise with Detours

The story of Abraham is not a story of a perfect man. Twice he lied and said his wife was his sister, putting her in danger to protect himself (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18). When the son God promised did not come quickly, he and Sarai tried to help God out, and Hagar bore Ishmael (Genesis 16). That choice brought sorrow to the family for generations.

Yet God did not cancel the covenant. He kept coming back to Abraham, repeating the promise, adding to it, and finally keeping it. When Abraham was ninety-nine, God appeared again and changed his name from Abram, "exalted father," to Abraham, "father of a multitude" (Genesis 17:5). A year later Isaac was born, right on God's schedule (Genesis 21:1-2).

That is the pattern of every covenant God makes with people. We stumble. He stays faithful.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 12:1-3. List every promise God makes. Which ones are about Abram himself, and which reach beyond him?
2. What did Abram have to leave behind to follow God? What might God be asking you to leave behind?
3. Why did God choose one family? How does Galatians 3:8 answer that question?
4. Read Genesis 15:1-6. What did Abram do that God counted as righteousness? Why does it matter that this happened before circumcision and before the law?
5. Abraham failed more than once, yet God kept His covenant. How does that encourage you?
6. Read Romans 4:16-25. How is your faith like Abraham's?

Chapter 6: The Night God Walked Alone

> *And it happened, the sun had gone **down**, and **there** was thick darkness; and look, an oven of smoke and a torch of fire which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD cut a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:"*
>
> Genesis 15:17-18 (SLB)

Genesis 15 contains one of the strangest scenes in the Bible. It is also one of the most beautiful, once you understand what is happening.

"By What Will I Know?"

Right after Abram believed God about the stars, God reminded him of the land. "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess it" (Genesis 15:7). Abram asked a fair question.

> *And he said, "Lord GOD, by what will I know that I will possess it?"* (Genesis 15:8)

Abram was not doubting the way he would doubt later with Hagar. He was asking for assurance. And God answered him, not with an argument, but with a covenant ceremony.

The Pieces on the Ground

God told Abram to bring a heifer, a female goat, and a ram, each three years old, along with a turtledove and a young pigeon. Abram cut the large animals in two and laid each half across from the other, leaving a path down the middle. He did not cut the birds (Genesis 15:9-10).

Anyone in Abram's world would have known what this was. As we saw in Chapter 1, two parties making a covenant would walk together between the pieces. They were saying, "May I end up like these animals if I break my word." Jeremiah 34:18-20 shows the same practice centuries later, and God holds the leaders of Judah to the curse they took on themselves.

So Abram waited. Birds of prey came down on the carcasses, and he drove them away (Genesis 15:11). The day wore on. Then, as the sun went down, a deep sleep fell on him, and a great and dreadful darkness.

What God Told Him in the Dark

Before the ceremony, God told Abram the future. His descendants would be strangers in a land not their own, enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. Then God would judge that nation, and they would come out with great possessions. Abram himself would die in peace at a good old age. In the fourth generation his descendants would return, because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete (Genesis 15:13-16).

That is a remarkable thing for God to say. He told Abram, before he had even one son, about the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus. And He gave a reason for the delay: God would not drive out the people of Canaan until their sin had fully ripened. God's judgments are never rushed and never unfair.

Only God Walked Through

Then it happened.

> *And it happened, the sun had gone **down**, and **there** was thick darkness; and look, an oven of smoke and a torch of fire which passed between these pieces.* (Genesis 15:17)

Look at who passed between the pieces. Not Abram. He was asleep. Only a smoking oven and a flaming torch, a picture of God's own presence, like the pillar of cloud and fire that would later lead Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 13:21) and the smoke and fire on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18).

In every human covenant like this, both parties walked through. Here only God did. In effect, God was saying, "If this promise fails, let it fall on Me." Abram added nothing to it. He could not break it, because he had not sworn anything. The whole weight of the covenant rested on God alone.

> *On that day the LORD cut a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:"* (Genesis 15:18)

That is why Bible teachers call the covenant with Abraham unconditional. It does not mean Abraham's descendants could do whatever they wanted with no consequences. The rest of the Old Testament makes that clear. Generations that turned from God lost the enjoyment of the land for a time. But the promise itself could not be lost, because God alone had sworn it.

The Borders of the Land

God gave Abram the boundaries right there: from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, and He listed ten peoples who lived in that land (Genesis 15:18-21).

Israel has never held all of that land for long. Under David and Solomon, Israel's rule reached furthest, and the Bible says Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the river to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21). But those were subject kingdoms paying tribute, not the land held and settled as Israel's own, and it did not last. I believe the full promise still waits for the day the Son of David reigns, which we will look at in Chapter 25. God does not give partial credit on His own promises.

What This Means for You

You may not own one acre of the land God promised Abram. But the night God walked alone is your story too.

At the cross, God did something even more amazing than walking between the pieces. In Jesus, He took the curse of our broken promises on Himself. Paul says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:13-14).

Abram slept while God bound Himself. We were dead in our sins when Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8; Ephesians 2:4-5). In both cases, the covenant rests on God, and that is why it holds.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 15:7-11. What did Abram ask, and how did God answer?
2. What would Abram have expected to happen in a covenant ceremony like this? What actually happened?
3. Why does it matter that only God passed between the pieces?
4. Read Genesis 15:13-16. What did God tell Abram about the future? What does the reason for the delay teach you about God's justice?
5. How does Galatians 3:13-14 connect the night God walked alone with the cross?
6. Is there an area of your life where you are trying to hold up your side of a promise that only God can keep? What would it look like to rest on Him instead?

Chapter 7: The Sign, the Son, and the Oath

> *And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you.*
>
> Genesis 17:7 (SLB)

God's covenant with Abraham was not made in a single day. It was announced in Genesis 12, sealed in Genesis 15, given a sign in Genesis 17, and sworn with an oath in Genesis 22. Then it was passed down to Isaac and to Jacob. In this chapter we follow it through those steps.

In recovery, my biggest struggle was wondering whether my past had disqualified me from God's grace. Hebrews 6:13-18 settled it. God backed His promise with an oath sworn by Himself so that doubting people like me could have strong assurance. When our confidence shakes, we anchor to His oath, not our track record.

An Everlasting Covenant

Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, the LORD appeared to Abram again.

> *And Abram was a son of ninety-nine years, and the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I **am** God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. And I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly, exceedingly."* (Genesis 17:1-2)

In this chapter God uses the phrase My covenant again and again, nine times in all. He changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. He promises that kings will come from them (Genesis 17:6, 16). And He calls it an everlasting covenant, with an everlasting possession of the land (Genesis 17:7-8).

Notice the heart of it once more: "to be God to you and to your seed after you" (Genesis 17:7). Land and children were wonderful gifts, but the greatest gift was God Himself.

The Sign of Circumcision

Then God gave the covenant a sign.

> *This **is** My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised **in** the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between Me and you.* (Genesis 17:10-11)

Every male in Abraham's house was to be circumcised, including servants born in the house or bought from outside. A baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). Any male who refused was to be cut off from his people, because he had broken God's covenant (Genesis 17:14).

Why this sign? The Bible does not give a full explanation, but a few things are clear. It was a cutting, which fits the language of cutting a covenant. It was permanent; you cannot undo it. And it marked the

very place where the promised seed would come from. Every Jewish boy carried in his own body a reminder that God had promised Abraham a family.

Paul adds something important. Abraham received circumcision as a sign and seal of the righteousness he already had by faith, before he was circumcised (Romans 4:11). The sign did not make him right with God. It confirmed what God had already done.

> *And he received a sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which **he had** in the uncircumcision, for him to be father of all who believe through uncircumcision, for the righteousness to be reckoned to them also* (Romans 4:11)

The Old Testament also says, again and again, that what God really wanted was a circumcised heart, a heart cut free from stubbornness and turned toward Him (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). Paul says the same (Romans 2:28-29). An outward sign without an inward faith never pleased God.

Isaac, Not Ishmael

When God said Sarah would have a son, Abraham laughed, and asked God to let Ishmael live before Him (Genesis 17:17-18). God's answer was kind but firm.

> *And God said, "Indeed, Sarah your wife **is** bearing you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, for his seed after him."* (Genesis 17:19)

God did not reject Ishmael. He promised to bless him, make him fruitful, and make him a great nation, the father of twelve princes (Genesis 17:20). And God kept that promise too. But the covenant line would run through Isaac, the son of promise, born when it was humanly impossible. Later God told Abraham, "in Isaac seed will be called for you" (Genesis 21:12).

The Test on the Mountain

Then came the hardest day of Abraham's life. God told him to take his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loved, and offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:2).

Abraham got up early and went. He told his servants that he and the boy would worship and come back (Genesis 22:5). When Isaac asked where the lamb was, Abraham said, "God will see to the lamb for Himself" (Genesis 22:8). Hebrews tells us what was in Abraham's mind: he reasoned that God was able to raise Isaac even from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). God had promised that the covenant would run through Isaac. So if Isaac died, God would have to bring him back.

At the last moment, the angel of the LORD stopped Abraham's hand. Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns, and he offered it in place of his son (Genesis 22:11-13). Abraham named the place "The LORD Will See" (Genesis 22:14). Many English Bibles say "The LORD Will Provide." Both are right: the Hebrew word means to see, and when God sees to something, He provides it.

About two thousand years later, not far from that same Mount Moriah, where Solomon would one day build the temple (2 Chronicles 3:1), God did not hold back His own Son, His only Son, whom He loved

(Romans 8:32). There was no ram in the thicket that day. Jesus was the Lamb God saw to, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

God Swears by Himself

After the test, God did something He had not done before with Abraham. He swore an oath.

> *and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, that because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only **son**, that I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which **is** on the shore of the sea; and your seed will possess the gate of his enemies. And all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your seed, because you have listened to My voice."* (Genesis 22:16-18)

This is the oath Hebrews 6:13 talks about. God had already promised. Now He bound Himself with an oath, and since there was no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself. Mary's song and Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1 both look back to this oath as the reason God sent Jesus (Luke 1:54-55, 72-73).

Passed Down to Isaac and Jacob

The covenant did not end with Abraham. God repeated it to Isaac, in almost the same words.

> *Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you; for to you and to your seed I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and I will give to your seed all these lands; and all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your seed* (Genesis 26:3-4)

Then He repeated it to Jacob, the night Jacob slept on a stone and saw a ladder reaching to heaven.

> *And look, the LORD **was** standing above it, and He said, "I **am** the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you are lying, to you I will give it, and to your seed. And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out toward the west and toward the east and toward the north and toward the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the ground shall be blessed."* (Genesis 28:13-14)

God later changed Jacob's name to Israel (Genesis 32:28; 35:10-12), and Jacob's twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. From then on, God would call Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Exodus 3:6, 15). When Israel suffered in Egypt four hundred years later, the Bible says God heard their groaning and remembered His covenant (Exodus 2:24).

Notice that the covenant passed to Isaac and not Ishmael, and to Jacob and not Esau. God chose the line. That is not because Isaac and Jacob were better men. Jacob was a schemer for much of his life. It is because the covenant was always about grace. Paul uses Jacob and Esau to make this very point (Romans 9:10-13).

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 17:1-8. What new promises did God add in this chapter? What is the heart of the covenant in verse 7?

2. What was the sign of the covenant with Abraham? Why do you think God chose that sign?

3. Read Romans 4:9-12. Did circumcision make Abraham right with God? What was it for?

4. What does it mean to have a circumcised heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:28-29)?

5. How does the story of Genesis 22 point ahead to Jesus? List as many connections as you can find.

6. Why did God swear an oath after Abraham had already believed and obeyed? How does Hebrews 6:13-18 say that oath helps you?

7. Jacob was far from perfect, yet the covenant passed through him. What does that teach you about grace?

Chapter 8: The Covenant at Sinai

> *And now, if you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be to Me a treasured possession out of all the peoples; for all the earth **belongs** to Me. And you, you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These **are** the words which you shall speak to the sons of Israel.*
>
> Exodus 19:5-6 (SLB)

Four hundred years after God spoke to Abraham under the stars, his descendants were slaves in Egypt, just as God had said they would be. Then God kept His word. He sent Moses, struck Egypt with ten plagues, split the sea, and brought Israel out. Three months later they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, and God made a covenant with the whole nation.

Rescue First, Then Rules

Before God gave Israel a single command at Sinai, He reminded them of what He had already done.

> *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Myself.* (Exodus 19:4)

That order matters more than almost anything else in this chapter. God did not say, "Obey Me, and I will rescue you." He said, "I have rescued you. Now be My people." The Ten Commandments open the same way: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves" (Exodus 20:2). The law was given to a people who were already saved from Egypt. It told them how to live as God's people, not how to become God's people.

A Conditional Covenant

At the same time, the covenant at Sinai was clearly conditional. Look at the little word if in Exodus 19:5: "if you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant." The blessings God promised in this covenant depended on Israel's obedience.

And the people agreed. Moses told them all the words of the LORD, and they answered with one voice that they would do all of it (Exodus 19:8; 24:3). Then Moses wrote down the words, built an altar, offered sacrifices, and read the book of the covenant aloud.

> *And he took the book of the covenant, and he read **it** in the ears of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will obey." And Moses took the blood, and he sprinkled **it** on the people, and he said, "Look, the blood of the covenant which the LORD has cut with you concerning all these words."* (Exodus 24:7-8)

Notice the contrast with Genesis 15. There, only God walked between the pieces. Here, the people swore too. They made promises they would not be able to keep. Within weeks, they were dancing around a golden calf (Exodus 32).

What God Gave Israel at Sinai

The covenant at Sinai was much more than the Ten Commandments. It included:

- **The Ten Commandments**, written by God's own finger on two tablets of stone (Exodus 20:1-17; 31:18).
- **Laws for daily life**, covering justice, property, family, the poor, servants, and strangers (Exodus 21 to 23). Moses called this section the book of the covenant (Exodus 24:7).
- **The tabernacle**, a tent where God would live among His people (Exodus 25:8).
- **The priesthood** of Aaron and his sons, and the tribe of Levi to serve with them (Exodus 28; Numbers 3).
- **The sacrifices**, especially the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year with blood (Leviticus 16).
- **The feasts**: Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Weeks, Trumpets, Atonement, and Booths (Leviticus 23).
- **Laws of clean and unclean**, including food laws, which set Israel apart from the nations (Leviticus 11; 20:24-26).
- **Blessings and curses**: rain, harvest, peace, and God's presence for obedience; sickness, defeat, and finally exile for disobedience (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in the law of Moses. The number comes from the rabbis, not from the Bible itself, but it gives you a sense of how much God gave Israel at Sinai. It was a complete way of life for a nation.

The Sign of the Sabbath

Like the covenants with Noah and Abraham, the covenant at Sinai had a sign. It was the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest.

> *And the sons of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations **as** an everlasting covenant. Between Me and the sons of Israel it **is** a sign forever; for **in** six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.'* (Exodus 31:16-17)

Notice that God says this sign is between Him and the sons of Israel. That will matter when we ask, in Chapter 20, whether Christians are required to keep the Sabbath.

A Kingdom of Priests

God's purpose for Israel at Sinai was not only for Israel. He said they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). A priest stands between God and people. Israel was meant to stand between God and the nations, showing the world what God is like. Moses told them that when the nations heard these laws, they would say, "Surely this great nation ***is*** a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6).

Peter uses the same words for the church: a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9). I will explain in Part Four why I believe that is a shared calling, not a replacement.

God's Name on the Line

After the golden calf, God threatened to destroy the people and start over with Moses. Moses pleaded with God, and his argument is worth noticing. He did not say Israel deserved mercy. He reminded God of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Exodus 32:13). God relented.

Then God showed Moses His glory and proclaimed His own name.

> *And the LORD passed by before his face, and He proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and He will surely not leave* ***the guilty*** *unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on sons and on sons of sons, on the third and on the fourth* ***generation****."* (Exodus 34:6-7)

This is the God of the covenants. He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in steadfast love and faithfulness. The Hebrew word for steadfast love is **chesed** (say it KHEH-sed), and it shows up over and over in covenant passages. It means love that stays loyal. It is love bound by a promise. But this same God will not leave the guilty unpunished. Both halves of that name will matter for the rest of the Old Testament, until they meet at the cross.

Study Questions

1. Read Exodus 19:3-6. What had God already done for Israel? What did He want them to become?
2. Why does it matter that God rescued Israel before He gave them the law?
3. Compare Exodus 24:3-8 with Genesis 15:17. Who made promises in each covenant? Why is that difference so important?
4. Look at the list of things God gave Israel at Sinai. Which ones surprise you? Which ones point ahead to Jesus?
5. What did it mean for Israel to be a kingdom of priests? How does 1 Peter 2:9 use the same words?
6. Read Exodus 34:6-7. Which part of God's name means the most to you? Why do you think God named both His mercy and His justice?

Chapter 9: Why God Gave the Law

> *So then the law has become our child-guardian to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith. But the faith having come, we are no longer under a child-guardian.*
>
> Galatians 3:24-25 (SLB)

If God's promise to Abraham rested on faith, and if Abraham was counted righteous before the law ever existed, then a fair question follows. Why did God give the law at all? Paul asks that exact question in Galatians, and his answer helps us understand every covenant that follows.

> *Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom it has been promised, having been ordained through angels in **the** hand of a mediator.*
> (Galatians 3:19)

The Law Is Good

Let me start where Paul starts. Some Christians talk about the law as if it were something bad, a mistake God had to fix later. Paul never talks that way.

> *So the law indeed **is** holy, and the commandment **is** holy and righteous and good.* (Romans 7:12)

The law came from God. It showed His character: His holiness, His justice, His care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger. The psalmists loved it. Psalm 19 says the law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalm 19:7). Psalm 119 spends 176 verses delighting in God's word. Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).

The problem was never the law. The problem was us.

Four Things the Law Did

Here is how the New Testament explains what the law was for.

It showed sin for what it is. Paul says that through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20). He would not have known coveting was sin if the law had not said, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:7). The law is like a mirror. It shows you the dirt on your face. It cannot wash it off.

It shut every mouth. Paul says the law speaks so that every mouth may be closed and the whole world held accountable to God (Romans 3:19). Israel, with all its advantages, could not keep the law. If they could not, no one could.

> ***Is** the law then against the promises of God? May it not be! For if a law had been given which was able to give life, righteousness would indeed have been by law. But the Scripture shut up all **things** under sin, so that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* (Galatians 3:21-22)

It guarded Israel until Christ came. Paul calls the law a child-guardian, the SLB's word for a household servant who watched over a child, walked him to school, and kept him in line until he was grown (Galatians 3:24-25). The law kept Israel separate from the nations, protected the line of the promised Seed, and taught a whole nation what holiness and sacrifice meant. But a child-guardian is temporary. When the child grows up, the guardian's job is done.

It pointed ahead to something better. The sacrifices, the priesthood, the tabernacle, and the feasts were all shadows of something real still to come.

> *For the law, having a shadow of the coming good things, not the very image of the things, can never with the same sacrifices which they offer continually every year perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, because those serving, once purified, would no longer have any conscience of sins? But in these* ***there is*** *a reminder of sins every year. For* ***it is*** *impossible* ***for the*** *blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins.* (Hebrews 10:1-4)

Every lamb that died at the altar said, "Sin brings death." And every lamb also said, "But God accepts a substitute." The blood of animals could never take away sin by itself. But it pointed to the blood that could.

The Law Did Not Cancel the Promise

We saw this in Chapter 2, but it is worth saying again. The covenant at Sinai came 430 years after the covenant with Abraham, and it did not cancel it (Galatians 3:17). God did not switch from a plan of grace to a plan of works and then back again. The promise to Abraham stood the whole time. The law was added alongside it, "until the seed should come" (Galatians 3:19).

That also means that no one in the Old Testament was ever saved by keeping the law. They were saved the same way Abraham was: by trusting God's promise. David knew this. He wrote about the blessing of the man whose sin is forgiven, to whom the LORD does not count iniquity (Psalm 32:1-2), and Paul quotes him for that very reason (Romans 4:6-8).

Blessings and Curses

The covenant at Sinai ended with two lists, one of blessings and one of curses (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 27 to 28). If Israel obeyed, they would have rain in its season, full harvests, peace in the land, victory over enemies, and God's presence among them. If they disobeyed, the curses would come in waves, each worse than the last: disease, drought, defeat, siege, and finally exile.

> *And it shall be, just as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good and to multiply you, so the LORD will rejoice over you to make you perish and to destroy you; and you will be torn away from off the ground to which you are going in to take possession of it. And the LORD will scatter you among all the peoples, from the end of the earth to the end of the earth; and you will serve there other gods which you have not known, you and your fathers, wood and stone.*
> (Deuteronomy 28:63-64)

Those are hard words to read. But here is what amazes me. In the very same chapter that describes the worst of the curses, God promised that He would not break His covenant with Israel even then.

> *And yet even **with** this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, and I will not abhor them, to make an end of them, to break My covenant with them; for I **am** the LORD their God. And I will remember for them the covenant of the former ones, whom I brought out from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be their God. I **am** the LORD.'*
> (Leviticus 26:44-45)

God knew Israel would break the covenant at Sinai. He told them ahead of time. And He told them that even when they did, He would remember the older covenant, the one He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Leviticus 26:42). The conditional covenant could be broken. The unconditional covenant could not.

Where the Law Leaves Us

The law leaves us at the end of ourselves, and that is exactly where God wants us. It tells us what is right, shows us that we have not done it, and points us to a sacrifice we cannot provide. It is like a road sign that says, "Hospital, 1 mile." The sign is good and true. But you don't stop at the sign and expect it to heal you. You follow it to the place it points.

Paul's own story shows this. He was blameless by the standard of the law, as far as outward righteousness goes (Philippians 3:6). Yet he counted all of it as loss compared to knowing Christ, and having a righteousness that comes from God through faith (Philippians 3:7-9).

Study Questions

1. Why do some people think of the law as bad? How does Romans 7:12 correct that idea?
2. Read Romans 3:19-20 and 7:7. How is the law like a mirror?
3. What is a child-guardian (Galatians 3:24-25)? How did the law serve Israel that way?
4. How did the sacrifices point ahead to Jesus? Read Hebrews 10:1-14.
5. Read Leviticus 26:40-45. What did God promise to do even after Israel broke the covenant at Sinai? Why could He promise that?
6. Has the law ever brought you to the end of yourself? How did that point you to Christ?

Chapter 10: The Feasts of the Covenant

> *Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, 'The appointed times of the LORD, which you shall proclaim **as** convocations of holiness, these, they **are** My appointed times.*
>
> Leviticus 23:2 (SLB)

Part of the covenant at Sinai was a calendar. God gave Israel seven appointed times to gather before Him every year. Leviticus 23 lists them all. Most Christians have heard of Passover, and some know about Pentecost, but few have looked at the whole set. When you do, you find something remarkable. The feasts tell the story of redemption in order, and Jesus has been keeping them on schedule.

Translating the Old Testament for the SLB, I saw all seven feasts of Leviticus 23 laid out in order. The spring feasts lined up with Christ's first coming. That gives us good reason to trust that the fall feasts point ahead just as surely. Leviticus 23 turns Israel's calendar into a map of God's faithfulness.

Appointed Times

The Hebrew word God uses is **moed** (say it mo-ED), an appointed time, like an appointment on a calendar. God says these are not Israel's feasts but His: "these, they are My appointed times" (Leviticus 23:2). He set the dates. He was telling His people when to meet with Him.

There are seven, arranged in two groups. Four come in the spring, in the first month and the weeks right after it. Three come in the fall, in the seventh month. In between is the long summer harvest.

Feast	When	What Israel did	How it points to Christ
Passover	First month, 14th day	Killed a lamb; remembered the blood on the doorposts in Egypt	Christ our Passover was sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7)
Unleavened Bread	First month, 15th to 21st	Ate bread without yeast for seven days	A life cleansed of the old leaven of sin (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)
Firstfruits	The day after the Sabbath following Passover	Waved the first sheaf of the harvest before the LORD	Christ raised from the dead as the firstfruits (1 Corinthians 15:20)
Weeks (Pentecost)	Fifty days later	Offered two loaves of new grain	The Spirit poured out and the church born (Acts 2:1-4)
Trumpets	Seventh month, 1st day	A memorial of a loud blast	Many see the trumpet that gathers God's people (1 Thessalonians 4:16; Matthew 24:31)
Day of Atonement	Seventh month, 10th day	The high priest entered the Most Holy Place; the people afflicted their souls	Israel's national repentance when they look on Him (Zechariah 12:10 to 13:1)
Booths (Tabernacles)	Seventh month, 15th to 21st	Lived in booths to remember the wilderness	God dwelling with His people; the nations keep it in the kingdom (Zechariah 14:16)

The Spring Feasts: Kept at His First Coming

Look at how exactly Jesus fulfilled the spring feasts.

Passover. Jesus was crucified at Passover, during the very days the lambs were being killed in Jerusalem (John 18:28; 19:14). John the Baptist had called Him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Paul says it plainly.

> *Therefore cleanse out the old leaven, so that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened. For also our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ.* (1 Corinthians 5:7)

Unleavened Bread. Yeast in the Bible often stands for sin spreading through something (Matthew 16:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Jesus was without sin, and His body lay in the tomb during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Paul tells believers to celebrate the feast not with old leaven but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Firstfruits. On the day after the Sabbath following Passover, the priest waved the first sheaf of the barley harvest before the LORD, a promise that the rest of the harvest would follow (Leviticus 23:10-11). Jesus rose on the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath (Matthew 28:1). Paul calls Him the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20). His resurrection is the guarantee that ours will follow (1 Corinthians 15:23).

Weeks. Fifty days after Firstfruits came the Feast of Weeks, called Pentecost in Greek, from the word for fifty (Leviticus 23:15-16). On that exact day, the Holy Spirit came on the disciples in Jerusalem, and three thousand people were saved (Acts 2:1-4, 41). The new covenant promise of the Spirit was kept on God's appointed day. Notice too that the offering at Weeks was two loaves baked with leaven (Leviticus 23:17), unlike the unleavened bread at Passover. Some teachers see in those two loaves a picture of Jew and Gentile, both imperfect, brought together before God in the church. That is an application, not a direct teaching of the text, but it is worth thinking about.

The Long Summer

Between Weeks and the fall feasts came the long summer harvest season, with no feasts at all. Many Bible teachers see in that gap a picture of the church age, the long season when the gospel goes out and the harvest is gathered from the nations (Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35). I hold that loosely. The calendar does not say so in words. But the pattern is striking.

The Fall Feasts: Waiting for His Return

If Jesus kept the spring feasts at His first coming, on the very days God appointed, it makes sense to expect Him to keep the fall feasts at His second coming. Here I need to be careful, because the New Testament does not spell this out the way it does for Passover and Firstfruits. What follows is how many Bible teachers, including me, connect the dots.

Trumpets. The seventh month began with a memorial of a loud blast (Leviticus 23:24). The Bible connects trumpets with the gathering of God's people and the return of Christ. Paul says the Lord will descend with the trumpet of God (1 Thessalonians 4:16), and that the dead will be raised at the last

trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52). Jesus said He would send His angels with a great trumpet to gather His elect (Matthew 24:31). Some see the Feast of Trumpets fulfilled in the Rapture, some in the gathering of Israel at the end of the tribulation. Either way, it looks ahead to a trumpet still to sound.

Day of Atonement. Ten days later came the most solemn day of the year. The high priest entered the Most Holy Place with blood, and the whole nation was to afflict their souls (Leviticus 16; 23:27). Jesus has already entered heaven with His own blood, once for all (Hebrews 9:11-12). But the national mourning and cleansing of Israel is still ahead, when they look on Him whom they pierced and mourn, and a fountain is opened for sin and impurity (Zechariah 12:10 to 13:1).

Booths. Last came the joyful Feast of Booths, when Israel lived in shelters for a week to remember that God had lived among them in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:42-43). John says the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Greek word for dwelt means to pitch a tent (John 1:14). But the full Feast of Booths is still coming. Zechariah says that in the kingdom, the nations will go up to Jerusalem year after year to worship the King and celebrate the Feast of Booths (Zechariah 14:16). And at the very end, God's tabernacle will be with people forever (Revelation 21:3).

A Calendar Only God Could Write

Moses wrote Leviticus about fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born. No one in Israel could have arranged for the Messiah to die at Passover, rise on Firstfruits, and send the Spirit on Pentecost. God set the dates, and God kept them.

Paul says the feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths were a shadow of what was to come, and the body belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Christians are not required to keep Israel's feasts, as we will see in Chapter 20. But we are free to learn from them, and some Christians find great blessing in sharing a Passover meal and seeing Jesus in every part of it. The God who wrote the calendar is the God who keeps covenant, down to the day.

Study Questions

1. Read Leviticus 23. List the seven feasts in order. Which ones were you already familiar with?
2. Why does it matter that God calls these "My appointed times"?
3. How did Jesus fulfill each of the four spring feasts? Which connection is most meaningful to you?
4. Why does the author hold loosely the idea that the summer gap pictures the church age?
5. How might the three fall feasts point to events still ahead?
6. Read Colossians 2:16-17. How should Christians think about the feasts today?

Chapter 11: The Land Covenant

> *then the LORD your God will turn back your captivity and have compassion on you, and He will return and gather you from all the peoples to which the LORD your God has scattered you.*
>
> Deuteronomy 30:3 (SLB)

Forty years after Sinai, Israel stood on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from the land God had promised Abraham. The generation that left Egypt had died in the wilderness. Their children were about to go in. Before they did, Moses spoke to them one more time, and the book of Deuteronomy records what he said. Near the end, he told them about the future, and God made another covenant with them.

A Covenant Besides Sinai

Deuteronomy 29 opens with a sentence that is easy to skip.

> *These **are** the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.* (Deuteronomy 29:1)

Besides the covenant at Horeb, which is another name for Sinai. That is why many Bible teachers see Deuteronomy 29 and 30 as a separate covenant. Some call it the **Palestinian covenant**, a name that goes back to older Bible teachers, but because that word carries a very different meaning today, I call it the **land covenant**. Others see these chapters as a renewal of the Sinai covenant for the new generation, not a separate covenant at all. Either way, the content is clear, and it is about Israel's future in the land.

Scattered and Gathered

Moses did not tell Israel, "If you are scattered." He said, "when all these things come on you" (Deuteronomy 30:1). He knew how the story would go. Israel would turn from God, the curses would fall, and they would be banished among the nations. And then God would do something only God could do.

> *And it shall be, when all these things come on you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you bring **them** back to your heart among all the nations to which the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you today, you and your sons, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will turn back your captivity and have compassion on you, and He will return and gather you from all the peoples to which the LORD your God has scattered you. If your banished **one** is at the end of the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers took possession of, and you shall take possession of it; and He will do you good and multiply you more than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life.* (Deuteronomy 30:1-6)

Look at the promises stacked up in those verses:

1. God will turn back their captivity and have compassion on them.
2. He will gather them from all the peoples, even from the end of the heavens.
3. He will bring them back into the land their fathers possessed.
4. He will do them good and multiply them.
5. He will circumcise their heart and the heart of their children, so they will love Him with all their heart and soul.

That last promise is the key. Under Sinai, Israel was told to circumcise their own hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16). Here, God says He will do it for them. That is the same promise Jeremiah and Ezekiel later call the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Has This Happened Yet?

Israel was scattered more than once. The northern kingdom was carried off by Assyria in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:6). Judah was taken to Babylon, with Jerusalem and the temple destroyed in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:8-11). About seventy years later, a remnant came back under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, just as Jeremiah had said (Jeremiah 29:10; Ezra 1:1-4).

But that return was small, and it did not bring the new heart Deuteronomy 30 promised. Within a few generations the prophet Malachi was rebuking the people for the same sins as their fathers. Then in A.D. 70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the second temple, and the Jewish people were scattered across the world for almost nineteen hundred years.

On May 14, 1948, the modern State of Israel was declared, and Jewish people have been returning to the land from all over the world ever since. Many Christians, including me, see God's hand in that. A people scattered for almost two thousand years, still a people, back in their land. I do not know of anything like it in history.

I want to be careful here, though. Deuteronomy 30 promises a regathering that comes with a turning back to God and a new heart. Most Israelis today do not believe Jesus is the Messiah, and many are not religious at all. So I see 1948 as a real step toward the fulfillment, and a sign that God has not forgotten His people, but not the full fulfillment yet. Ezekiel 37 describes the dry bones coming together first, then breath entering them later (Ezekiel 37:7-10). The full return, with a new heart, will come when Israel looks on Him whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10), which I believe happens at the end of the tribulation, when Jesus returns. We will look at that in Chapters 24 and 25.

Christians Who See It Differently

Many Christians in the Reformed and covenant traditions believe the land promises were fulfilled in Joshua's day (Joshua 21:43-45), or under Solomon, or that they are fulfilled now in a spiritual way, in Christ and in the new earth to come. They point out that the New Testament says little directly about the land. Some also caution against treating the modern State of Israel as if every action it takes has God's approval.

That last caution is fair, and I agree with it. Supporting God's promise to Israel is not the same as approving every decision of a government. But I do not believe the land promise has been spiritualized away. God swore it to Abraham with no conditions (Genesis 15:18), called it an everlasting possession (Genesis 17:8), and repeated it through the prophets long after Joshua and Solomon (Amos 9:14-15; Ezekiel 36:24). Joshua 21:43 says God gave Israel the land He swore, and He did. But Amos, writing centuries after Joshua, still looked forward to the day Israel would be planted and never uprooted again.

> *And I will turn back the captivity of My people Israel, and they will build desolated cities and dwell **in them**, and they will plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they will make gardens and eat their fruit. And I will plant them on their land, and they will not be plucked up again from upon their land which I have given to them, says the LORD your God.* (Amos 9:14-15)

That has never happened yet. So I believe it is still ahead.

Life and Death

Moses closed the land covenant with a plea that still speaks to anyone who hears it.

> *I call the heavens and the earth to witness against you today: life and death I have set before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life, so that you may live, you and your seed, to love the LORD your God, to listen to His voice, and to cling to Him; for He **is** your life and the length of your days, to dwell on the ground which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them.* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

God's promises about the future did not make Israel's choices meaningless. Each generation could choose to love God and enjoy the blessing, or turn away and suffer. The same is true for us. God's plan will be accomplished. The question is whether we will walk in it.

Study Questions

1. Read Deuteronomy 29:1. Why do many teachers see Deuteronomy 29 and 30 as a separate covenant?
2. List the promises in Deuteronomy 30:1-6. Which one is the most important, and why?
3. Compare Deuteronomy 10:16 with 30:6. Who does the heart work in each verse? What changed?
4. How have the Jewish people been scattered and gathered through history? What do you think about the events of 1948?
5. Why do some Christians believe the land promises are already fulfilled? Why does the author believe they are still ahead? What do Amos 9:14-15 and Ezekiel 36:24-28 add?
6. Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20. What choice does God set before you today?

Chapter 12: Smaller Covenants Along the Way

> *My covenant was with him, the life and the peace, and I gave them to him **for** fear; and he feared Me, and before My name he was dismayed.*
>
> Malachi 2:5 (SLB)

The great covenants of the Bible get most of the attention, and rightly so. But the Old Testament is full of smaller covenants too. Some were made by God with one person or one family. Some were made between people. Some were times when Israel renewed its covenant with God after a season of drifting. Looking at a few of them helps us see how seriously the Bible takes a promise.

The Covenant of Priesthood with Phinehas

During the wilderness years, Israelite men were drawn into sexual sin and the worship of Baal of Peor by the women of Moab and Midian, and a plague broke out among the people (Numbers 25:1-9). Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, acted with zeal for God's honor, and the plague stopped. God then made a covenant with him.

> *Therefore say, 'Look, I am giving to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and for his seed after him a covenant of priesthood forever, because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel.'* (Numbers 25:12-13)

Malachi looks back on this priestly covenant centuries later and calls it a covenant of life and peace (Malachi 2:4-5). He uses it to shame the priests of his own day, who had corrupted it (Malachi 2:8). The priesthood of Aaron's line served under the covenant at Sinai until the time of Christ. Ezekiel even pictures the sons of Zadok, from the line of Phinehas, serving in a future temple (Ezekiel 44:15). Bible teachers differ on how to read Ezekiel's temple, and I will not settle that here. The point is that God did not forget His word to Phinehas.

A Covenant of Salt

Three times the Bible speaks of a covenant of salt. The priests' share of the holy offerings was given to them by a covenant of salt forever (Numbers 18:19). Grain offerings were to be seasoned with salt, the salt of the covenant of your God (Leviticus 2:13). And Abijah, king of Judah, reminded the northern tribes that God gave the kingdom to David and his sons forever by a covenant of salt (2 Chronicles 13:5).

Why salt? The Bible does not explain it. In the ancient world salt preserved food and did not spoil, and people who shared salt at a meal were bound to treat each other as friends. So a covenant of salt most likely means a lasting, unbreakable covenant. Jesus told His disciples, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), and Paul told the Colossians to let their speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6). Salt in the Bible stands for what lasts and what keeps.

Joshua at Shechem

At the end of his life, Joshua gathered all Israel at Shechem and told them the story of what God had done, from Abraham to the conquest. Then he put a choice before them: "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve." Then he said, "And I and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

The people answered three times that they would serve the LORD. Joshua warned them that they could not do it in their own strength, because God is holy and jealous (Joshua 24:19). They insisted. So Joshua made a covenant with them.

> *And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and to His voice we will listen." And Joshua made a covenant with the people on that day, and he set for them a statute and a judgment at Shechem.* (Joshua 24:24-25)

This was not a new covenant from God, but a renewal of the Sinai covenant by a new generation. Notice how closely it follows the pattern we saw in Chapter 1: history, a call to obey, witnesses (Joshua set up a large stone as a witness, Joshua 24:26-27), and a written record.

Jonathan and David

Not every covenant in the Bible is between God and people. Some of the most moving are between friends. Jonathan, son of King Saul, loved David as his own soul.

> *And Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.* (1 Samuel 18:3)

Jonathan gave David his own robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt (1 Samuel 18:4). Later, knowing David would be king instead of him, Jonathan asked David to show the steadfast love of the LORD to his family forever (1 Samuel 20:14-17). Years later, after Saul and Jonathan were dead, David asked whether anyone was left of the house of Saul to whom he could show kindness for Jonathan's sake. He found Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, lame in both feet, and brought him to eat at the king's table for the rest of his life (2 Samuel 9:1-13).

That is a picture of covenant love. Mephibosheth did nothing to earn his place at the table. He was there because of a promise made to someone else. In a much greater way, we sit at God's table because of a covenant made in Jesus.

Revivals of the Covenant

Several times in Israel's history, a godly leader called the nation back to the covenant.

- **Jehoiada the priest** made a covenant between the LORD, the king, and the people, that they would be the LORD's people, and they tore down the temple of Baal (2 Kings 11:17-18).
- **Hezekiah** told the priests and Levites it was in his heart to make a covenant with the LORD, so that His fierce anger would turn away (2 Chronicles 29:10). He cleansed the temple and held a great Passover.
- **Josiah**, after the book of the law was found in the temple, read it to all the people and made the covenant before the LORD.

> *And the king stood by the pillar and made the covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all **the** heart and with all **the** soul, to establish the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people stood in the covenant.* (2 Kings 23:3)

- **Ezra and Nehemiah** led the returned exiles in confessing their sins and their fathers' sins, and the leaders, Levites, and priests put their seal on a written agreement to walk in God's law (Nehemiah 9:38; 10:28-29).

Each of these revivals was real, and each did real good. But none of them lasted. Josiah's reforms were swept away by his sons. Nehemiah came back from a trip to Persia and found the people breaking the very promises they had signed (Nehemiah 13). These revivals show both how good God is to call His people back, and how badly they needed a covenant that would change their hearts, not just their behavior.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think God made a special covenant with Phinehas? What does Malachi 2:4-8 say about it?
2. What might a covenant of salt mean? How does Jesus use the picture of salt?
3. Read Joshua 24:14-27. What choice did Joshua put before Israel? What choice did he make for his own house?
4. Read 2 Samuel 9. How is David's kindness to Mephibosheth a picture of what God has done for you?
5. Why did revivals like Josiah's and Nehemiah's not last? What does that tell you about the human heart?
6. Is there a promise you have made to God that you need to renew?

Chapter 13: The Covenant with David

> *"I have made a covenant with My chosen one; I have sworn to David My servant: 'I will establish your offspring forever, and I will build your throne to generation and generation.'" Selah.*
>
> Psalm 89:3-4 (SLB)

David had finally settled into his palace in Jerusalem. The wars were mostly over. He looked around at his house of cedar and felt ashamed that the ark of God still sat in a tent. So he told the prophet Nathan he wanted to build God a house. Nathan said, in effect, "Go for it." But that night God spoke to Nathan, and the answer turned David's plan upside down.

"You Want to Build Me a House?"

God's message to David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and again in 1 Chronicles 17, is one of the high points of the Old Testament. God reminded David that He had taken him from following the sheep to be ruler over Israel, had been with him everywhere he went, and had cut off his enemies (2 Samuel 7:8-9). Then God said that He would make David a house. Not a building of cedar, but a dynasty, a royal family line that would last.

> *When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, and I will raise up your seed after you, who will come out from your inward parts, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to Me. When he commits iniquity, I will correct him with a rod of men and with strokes of the sons of mankind; and My steadfast love will not depart from him, as I removed* ***it*** *from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom will be established forever before you; your throne will be established forever.'*
> (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

What God Promised David

Here are the main promises, in plain words.

1. **A son.** God would raise up David's seed after him, one of his own sons.
2. **A temple.** That son would build a house for God's name. Solomon did this (1 Kings 6).
3. **A throne forever.** God would establish the throne of that son's kingdom forever.
4. **A Father and Son relationship.** God would be a father to him, and he would be a son to God.
5. **Discipline, but not rejection.** If David's sons sinned, God would correct them, but He would never take His steadfast love from them the way He took it from Saul.
6. **A house, a kingdom, and a throne forever.** David's line, his kingdom, and his throne would be established forever.

The word forever shows up again and again. And unlike the covenant at Sinai, there is no "if" attached to the promise itself. Discipline would come for sin, but the throne would not be lost forever. That is why Bible teachers call this covenant unconditional.

David's Response

David went in and sat before the LORD, and prayed one of the most humble prayers in the Bible. "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18). He had come to give God a gift and went away having received one far greater. That is how it always goes with God.

The Psalms Sing It

The covenant with David is celebrated all through the Psalms. Psalm 89 is a whole song about it. God says He has made a covenant with His chosen one and sworn to David that his offspring will last forever (Psalm 89:3-4). Then the psalm deals with the hard question: what if David's sons sin?

> *If his sons forsake My law and do not walk in My judgments, if they profane My statutes and do not keep My commandments, then I will punish their transgression with a rod and their iniquity with plagues. But My steadfast love I will not break off from him, and I will not deal falsely with My faithfulness. I will not profane My covenant, and what has gone out from My lips I will not change.* (Psalm 89:30-34)

God swore by His holiness. He will not lie to David (Psalm 89:35). Psalm 132 says the same thing: the LORD swore to David in faithfulness, and He will not turn back from it (Psalm 132:11).

When the Throne Fell Empty

And yet, the second half of Psalm 89 is a lament. The psalmist says it looks as if God has renounced the covenant with His servant and thrown his crown to the ground (Psalm 89:38-39). That is what it looked like when Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The last king of David's line, Zedekiah, was blinded and carried off in chains (2 Kings 25:7). For centuries after that, no son of David sat on a throne in Jerusalem.

Did God break His promise? Jeremiah answered that question while Jerusalem was falling. He said God's covenant with David was as sure as the cycle of day and night.

> *Thus says the LORD: 'If you can break My covenant of the day and My covenant of the night, so that daytime and night will not be in their time, also My covenant with David My servant can be broken, so that* ***there will*** *not be for him a son reigning on his throne, and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers.* (Jeremiah 33:20-21)

Hosea had already said Israel would live many days without king or prince, and afterward would return and seek the LORD their God and David their king (Hosea 3:4-5). David had been dead for centuries when Hosea wrote that. He was speaking of the great Son of David still to come.

The Son of David

The prophets kept pointing forward to one King from David's line. Isaiah said a child would be born whose names include Mighty God and Prince of Peace, and that He would reign on David's throne forever (Isaiah 9:6-7). He would be a shoot from the stump of Jesse, David's father (Isaiah 11:1). Jeremiah called Him a righteous Branch for David (Jeremiah 23:5-6). Ezekiel called Him "My servant David," one shepherd over a reunited Israel forever (Ezekiel 37:24-25).

Then the angel Gabriel came to a young woman in Nazareth who was engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David.

> *He will be great and will be called Son of* ***the*** *Most High; and* ***the*** *Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father, and He will reign over the house of Jacob to the ages, and of His kingdom there will be no end.* (Luke 1:32-33)

The New Testament opens by calling Jesus the son of David and the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). Blind men called out to Him as Son of David (Matthew 20:30). The crowds shouted it when He rode into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9). On the day of Pentecost, Peter said David knew God had sworn an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, and that David was speaking of the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:30-31). And in the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus calls Himself the root and the offspring of David (Revelation 22:16).

Is Jesus on David's Throne Now?

Here is a question Christians answer differently. Jesus rose from the dead and is seated now at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33-36; Hebrews 1:3). He reigns over all things. Many teachers believe that is the throne of David, and that the covenant with David is being fulfilled now, in heaven.

I agree that Jesus reigns now, and I agree that He is already Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). But I believe the full promise to David also includes a literal reign on the earth, in Jerusalem, over a restored Israel and over all the nations. Gabriel said He will reign over the house of Jacob (Luke 1:33). Jesus Himself told the twelve that in the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). He also spoke of His own throne as something distinct from His Father's throne, where He sits now (Revelation 3:21). I believe that reign begins when He returns, and we will look at it in Chapter 25.

Study Questions

1. Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17. What did David want to do for God? What did God promise to do for David instead?
2. List the promises God made to David. Which ones were kept by Solomon, and which ones could only be kept by Jesus?
3. How does God handle the sins of David's sons in the covenant (2 Samuel 7:14-15; Psalm 89:30-34)? What does that tell you about how He handles yours?
4. Read Psalm 89:38-51. How did it look as if God had broken His promise? How does Jeremiah 33:20-21 answer that?

5. Find three places in the Gospels where people call Jesus the Son of David. What did they mean by it?

6. Do you believe Jesus is reigning on David's throne now, later, or both? Why?

Chapter 14: A Broken People and a Faithful God

> *For the mountains will be removed, and the hills will shake, and My steadfast love will not be removed from you, and the covenant of My peace will not shake, says the One who has compassion on you, the LORD.*
>
> Isaiah 54:10 (SLB)

If you read the Old Testament from Joshua to Malachi, one pattern repeats so often it can be painful to read. God is faithful. Israel is not. God warns. Israel ignores Him. Discipline comes. Israel cries out. God rescues. And then the cycle starts over. The book of Judges shows that cycle again and again (Judges 2:11-19), and it does not end with the judges.

This chapter is about what God did with a people who kept breaking His covenant.

Since my baptism in 1995, I have seen the cycle of Judges 2 in my own life. I drifted again in 2000 and again in 2013. I got comfortable, trouble followed my bad choices, and I cried out for help. Every time I turned back, God met me with mercy. Our stability never comes from willpower. It comes from a faithful God who does not let go of His own.

The Prophets as Covenant Messengers

We often think of the prophets as men who told the future, and they did. But most of what they did was call Israel back to the covenant. When a prophet said, “Thus says the LORD,” he was usually reminding Israel of what God had already said at Sinai. He listed the people’s sins, reminded them of the curses Moses had warned about, and pleaded with them to return before it was too late.

Jeremiah put it bluntly.

> *They have returned to the iniquities of their former fathers, who refused to hear My words; and they, they have walked after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers.* (Jeremiah 11:10)

Several prophets even speak in the form of a court case. God calls the mountains and the hills as witnesses, the same witnesses Moses called (Deuteronomy 30:19), and brings a charge against His people (Micah 6:1-2; Isaiah 1:2). Bible scholars call this a covenant lawsuit. God is not making up new rules. He is holding Israel to the covenant they swore.

A Marriage Betrayed

The prophets often describe the covenant as a marriage. God is the husband, and Israel is the bride He rescued and loved. In Ezekiel 16, God tells Jerusalem the story of a baby girl abandoned in a field on the day she was born. God passed by, saw her, and said, “Live.” He raised her, and when she was grown, He spread His robe over her and made a covenant with her.

> *And I passed by you and saw you, and look, your time **was** a time of love; and I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness; and I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became Mine.* (Ezekiel 16:8)

But she trusted in her beauty and played the harlot with the nations and their idols (Ezekiel 16:15). The chapter is hard to read. It is meant to be. Idolatry was not just breaking a rule. It was betraying a husband.

Hosea lived this out in his own life. God told him to marry a woman named Gomer, who was unfaithful to him, as a living picture of Israel's unfaithfulness to God (Hosea 1:2). Then God told him to go and buy her back, and love her again (Hosea 3:1-3).

"How Will I Give You Up?"

Here is the wonder of the prophets. After every charge and every warning, God's heart breaks through.

> *How will I give you up, Ephraim? Will I deliver you up, Israel? How will I make you like Admah? Will I set you like Zeboiim? My heart is overturned within Me; together My compassions have grown warm.* (Hosea 11:8)

God does not stop being holy. The exile came. Assyria carried off the northern tribes in 722 B.C., and Babylon carried off Judah in 586 B.C., exactly as the covenant curses had warned. But the same prophets who announced the exile also announced that it would not be the end.

> *For thus says the Lord GOD: And I will do with you as you have done, you who have despised an oath by breaking a covenant. And I Myself will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.* (Ezekiel 16:59-60)

Notice what God says there. Israel despised the oath and broke the covenant. So God would deal with her as she had done. And yet God would remember His covenant from the days of her youth and establish an everlasting covenant. Israel's unfaithfulness could break the conditional covenant at Sinai. It could not break God's faithfulness.

What God Promised After the Exile

The prophets who lived through Israel's worst days left us some of the most hopeful promises in the Bible. Here are a few.

- God would betroth Israel to Himself forever, in righteousness and justice and steadfast love and compassion (Hosea 2:19-20).
- His steadfast love would not be removed, even if the mountains were (Isaiah 54:10).
- He would make an everlasting covenant, the faithful acts of steadfast love promised to David (Isaiah 55:3).
- His Spirit and His words would never depart from Israel's mouth or their children's mouths (Isaiah 59:21).
- He would make an everlasting covenant and never turn away from doing them good, and He would put His fear in their hearts so they would not turn from Him (Jeremiah 32:40).
- He would make a covenant of peace, put His sanctuary among them forever, and be their God (Ezekiel 37:26-27).

Do you see the change? Under Sinai, everything depended on whether Israel would keep the covenant. In these promises, God says He will make sure they keep it. He will put His fear in their hearts. He will put His Spirit in them. He will not turn away. All of these promises flow into one great promise, which Jeremiah calls the new covenant, and which we will look at in the next chapter.

A Servant Who Is a Covenant

There is one more thread in the prophets I don't want you to miss. Isaiah speaks of a Servant of the LORD, a person, who will do what Israel failed to do. And God says something astonishing about Him.

> *I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, and I will take hold of Your hand, and I will watch over You, and I will give You for a covenant of **the** people, for a light of **the** nations* (Isaiah 42:6)

God does not only say the Servant will make a covenant. He says He will give the Servant as a covenant. The Servant Himself is the covenant. Later in Isaiah, this same Servant is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5), and the LORD lays on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). And He is a light for the nations, so that God's salvation reaches the end of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

Simeon held the baby Jesus in the temple and said He was that light, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for God's people Israel (Luke 2:32). The answer to Israel's broken covenant was not a better Israel. It was a Person.

Study Questions

1. Read Judges 2:11-19. Describe the cycle in your own words. Have you ever seen that cycle in your own life?
2. How were the prophets covenant messengers? Read Micah 6:1-8 for an example.
3. Why do you think the prophets described the covenant as a marriage? What does that tell you about how God sees sin?
4. Read Hosea 11:1-9. What do you learn about God's heart?
5. Look at the list of promises after the exile. What do they have in common? How are they different from the covenant at Sinai?
6. Read Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6. What does it mean that the Servant is given as a covenant?

Chapter 15: The New Covenant Promised

> *For this **is** the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law in their inward part, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me.*
>
> Jeremiah 31:33 (SLB)

Jeremiah lived through the end of everything. He warned Judah for forty years, and almost nobody listened. He was beaten, thrown in a cistern, called a traitor, and locked up. He watched Babylon burn Jerusalem and the temple. If anyone had reason to give up on God's people, it was Jeremiah.

And it was Jeremiah who received the clearest promise of the new covenant in the whole Old Testament.

Not Like the Old One

> *Look, days are coming, declares the LORD, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day I took hold of their hand to bring them out from the land of Egypt, in that they, they broke My covenant, and I, I was a husband over them, declares the LORD. For this **is** the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law in their inward part, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me. And they will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for all of them will know Me, from the least of them and to the greatest of them, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again.* (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This is the only place in the Old Testament that uses the exact words new covenant, but as we saw in the last chapter, the same promise appears all through the prophets. Let me walk through what Jeremiah says.

Who It Is Made With

God says He will make the new covenant "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31). That means the whole nation, the northern and southern kingdoms that had been split since the days of Solomon's son. Ezekiel saw the same reunion, with the two sticks becoming one in God's hand (Ezekiel 37:15-22).

That is worth noticing, because it will come back in Part Four. The new covenant was first promised to Israel. The New Testament makes clear that Gentiles share in it now through Christ. But that does not erase the fact that God first promised it to the nation of Israel, and I believe He will keep it with them as a nation too (Romans 11:26-27).

What Makes It New

Jeremiah says it will not be like the covenant God made with their fathers when He brought them out of Egypt. That is the Sinai covenant, which they broke, even though God was a husband to them. So what is different?

The law on the heart. At Sinai, God wrote His law on tablets of stone. In the new covenant, He writes it on hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). The problem was never that Israel did not know God's law. The problem was that they did not want to keep it. The new covenant changes the want-to.

Belonging. "I will be God to them, and they, they will be a people to Me." That was always the goal of every covenant. Now it will finally happen, from the inside out.

Knowing God personally. "All of them will know Me, from the least of them and to the greatest of them" (Jeremiah 31:34). Under Sinai, people needed priests and prophets to stand between them and God. In the new covenant, every one of God's people will know Him directly.

Forgiveness, complete and final. "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will not remember again." This is the foundation of all the rest. The sacrifices at Sinai reminded people of their sins every year (Hebrews 10:3). The new covenant takes sin away for good.

Ezekiel Adds the Spirit

Ezekiel was a priest who was carried off to Babylon. He prophesied to the exiles, and he saw the same new covenant from another angle.

> *And I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own ground. And I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And My Spirit I will put within you, and I will bring about that you walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do* ***them****.* (Ezekiel 36:24-27)

Ezekiel adds three things. First, God will gather Israel from the nations and bring them into their own land. The new covenant is tied to the land covenant. Second, God will cleanse them, sprinkling clean water on them. Third, and most important, God will give them a new heart and put His own Spirit within them. Under Sinai, God told them to obey. In the new covenant, God says, "I will bring about that you walk in My statutes."

Right after this, Ezekiel sees the valley of dry bones. God tells him the bones are the whole house of Israel, and that He will open their graves, put His Spirit in them, and place them in their own land (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

Built on the Older Covenants

The new covenant does not throw away the covenants that came before. It completes them.

- It fulfills the covenant with Abraham, bringing the blessing to all nations and the forgiveness Abraham received by faith (Galatians 3:14).
- It replaces the covenant at Sinai, doing what the law could not do (Romans 8:3-4; Hebrews 8:13).
- It fulfills the land covenant, giving the new heart Moses promised in Deuteronomy 30:6.
- It goes hand in hand with the covenant with David, since the same passages promise a King from David's line (Jeremiah 33:14-17; Ezekiel 37:24-26).

As Sure as the Sun

Right after the new covenant promise, God adds a guarantee that should settle every argument about whether He is finished with Israel.

> *Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day, the statutes of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea, and its waves roar; the LORD of armies **is** His name: If these statutes depart from before Me, declares the LORD, also the seed of Israel will cease from being a nation before Me all the days. Thus says the LORD: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be searched out, also I, I will reject all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, declares the LORD.* (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

Look outside tonight. If the moon and stars are still there, God has not cast off the seed of Israel. Can you measure the heavens? Then God will reject Israel. The answer, of course, is that nobody can. God tied His promise to Israel to the fixed order of creation, the same order He promised to keep in His covenant with Noah.

Waiting for the Mediator

When Malachi wrote the last book of the Old Testament, the new covenant had not come yet. Malachi promised that the Lord would suddenly come to His temple, "the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight" (Malachi 3:1). Then the prophets fell silent for about four hundred years.

The next time a messenger spoke, it was an angel in the temple, telling an old priest named Zechariah that his son would prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 1:13-17). And when Zechariah's son John was born, his father sang that God had remembered His holy covenant, the oath He swore to Abraham (Luke 1:72-73).

Study Questions

1. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. List every promise in it. Which one means the most to you?
2. Why would a covenant written on the heart be better than one written on stone?
3. Who was the new covenant first promised to? Why does that matter?
4. Read Ezekiel 36:24-28. What does Ezekiel add to Jeremiah's promise?
5. How does the new covenant build on the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David?
6. Read Jeremiah 31:35-37. What does this tell you about God's commitment to Israel? About His commitment to you?

Part Three: Jesus and the New Covenant

Chapter 16: The Cup of the New Covenant

> *And likewise the cup after dining, saying, "This cup **is** the new covenant in My blood, which is being poured out for you."*
>
> Luke 22:20 (SLB)

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus sat at a table in an upper room in Jerusalem with His twelve disciples. It was Passover, the meal that remembered how God brought Israel out of Egypt under the blood of a lamb. Every Jewish family in the city was eating the same meal that night. Then Jesus did something no one had ever done at a Passover table.

The Lord's Supper looks back to the cross, inward to examine ourselves, and forward until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). I hold a pre-tribulation Rapture view, so every time I take the cup, I remember that we are looking ahead to a real meeting with Christ. Remembering all three directions keeps communion from becoming routine.

This Is My Body, This Is My Blood

> *And having taken bread, having given thanks, He broke **it** and gave **it** to them, saying, "This is My body, which is being given for you; do this for My remembrance." And likewise the cup after dining, saying, "This cup **is** the new covenant in My blood, which is being poured out for you."* (Luke 22:19-20)

Matthew and Mark record the same words, and Paul repeats them as the tradition he received from the Lord (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). Every one of the four accounts uses the word covenant.

Picture what the disciples heard. For fifteen hundred years, the Passover cup had pointed back to Egypt. Now Jesus held it up and said it pointed to Him. They had heard the phrase new covenant from Jeremiah. They knew it meant forgiveness of sin, a new heart, and knowing God. And Jesus said, in effect, "It starts now, and it starts with My blood."

The Blood of the Covenant

Matthew and Mark record Jesus saying, "This is My blood, the blood of the new covenant, which is being poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). Matthew adds, "for forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

Any Jew who knew the Scriptures would have heard an echo. At Sinai, Moses took the blood of the sacrifices, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Look, the blood of the covenant which the LORD has cut with you" (Exodus 24:8). Jesus used almost the same words. The covenant at Sinai was sealed with the blood of animals. The new covenant is sealed with His own.

> *for this is My blood, the **blood** of the new covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.* (Matthew 26:28)

And notice the words “for many.” Isaiah said the Servant would bear the sin of many (Isaiah 53:12). Jesus was telling His disciples who He was. He was the Servant given as a covenant for the people (Isaiah 42:6), about to pour out His soul to death.

Why Blood?

People today sometimes find all this talk of blood strange or even offensive. But the Bible is serious about sin, and it is serious about what sin costs. God told Israel that the life of the flesh is in the blood, and that He had given it on the altar to make atonement (Leviticus 17:11). Hebrews sums it up in one line.

> *And almost all things are purified with blood according to the law, and apart from shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.* (Hebrews 9:22)

Sin is not a small mistake that can be waved away. It is rebellion against the holy God who gives us life, and it earns death (Romans 6:23). Forgiveness is free for us, but it was not free for God. It cost the life of His Son.

The Covenant Cut at the Cross

In Chapter 6 we saw God pass alone between the pieces, taking the curse of a broken covenant on Himself. At the cross, that picture became real. The next day, Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. He hung there from about the third hour to the ninth hour, and darkness covered the land (Mark 15:25, 33). Then He said, “It has been finished,” bowed His head, and gave up His spirit (John 19:30).

At that moment, the curtain of the temple, the curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from everyone but the high priest, was torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). God tore it. The way into His presence was open.

Do This in Remembrance

Jesus told His disciples to keep eating the bread and drinking the cup in His remembrance (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25). That is why Christians all over the world still share the Lord’s Supper, which many churches call Communion.

The Lord’s Supper is the sign of the new covenant, the way the rainbow was the sign for Noah and circumcision for Abraham. Paul says it does three things.

It looks back. We remember His death. “Do this, as often as you drink it, in My remembrance” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

It looks forward. “You proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Every time we take the cup, we say He is coming back. Jesus Himself said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until He drinks it new with us in His Father’s kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

It looks around. Paul warns against eating in an unworthy way, and tells each person to examine himself (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). In Corinth, the rich were eating their fill while the poor went hungry,

and Paul said that despised the church of God (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). The cup of the covenant binds us to God and to each other.

Christians differ on what happens in the bread and cup. Some believe Christ is present in the elements in a special way. Others, including me, see them as a memorial and a sign, through which Christ meets us by faith as we remember Him. I go into that more fully in my book on Communion, *The Lord's Table*. Whatever your church teaches, every Christian agrees on the main thing: the cup is the new covenant in His blood.

Study Questions

1. Why does it matter that Jesus spoke of the new covenant at a Passover meal?
2. Compare Exodus 24:8 with Mark 14:24. What did the disciples hear in Jesus' words?
3. Read Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22. Why does forgiveness require blood?
4. What did the torn curtain mean (Mark 15:38; Hebrews 10:19-22)?
5. What three directions does the Lord's Supper point? Which one do you tend to forget?
6. How should knowing that the cup is the sign of the new covenant change the way you take Communion?

Chapter 17: A Better Covenant

> *But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also **the** mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.*
>
> Hebrews 8:6 (SLB)

No book in the Bible explains the new covenant more fully than Hebrews. It was written to Jewish believers who were tempted to go back to the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. They were being pressured and persecuted, and the old ways felt safer. Hebrews tells them, over and over, that what they have in Jesus is better.

Better at Every Point

The word better runs all through Hebrews. Jesus is better than the angels (Hebrews 1:4). He is the guarantee of a better covenant (Hebrews 7:22). He is the mediator of a better covenant, enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). His sacrifice is better (Hebrews 9:23). We have a better hope (Hebrews 7:19) and a better possession (Hebrews 10:34). His blood speaks better things than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24).

Better does not mean the old covenant was bad. It means it was a shadow, and the real thing has come.

A Better Priest

Under Sinai, the priests came from the tribe of Levi, through Aaron. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, so He could not be a priest under that covenant (Hebrews 7:13-14). Instead, God made Him a priest by an oath, in the order of Melchizedek, the king and priest who blessed Abraham long before Levi was born (Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7:1-17).

The Levitical priests kept dying, so there had to be many of them. Jesus lives forever, so His priesthood never passes to anyone else. That is why He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:23-25).

Why a New Covenant Was Needed

Hebrews quotes the whole new covenant promise from Jeremiah 31, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament (Hebrews 8:8-12). Before the quote, the writer says something important.

> *For if that first **covenant** had been faultless, a place would not have been sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, "Look, days are coming, says **the** Lord, and I will complete with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a new covenant,"* (Hebrews 8:7-8)

The fault was with the people, not with God. The covenant at Sinai was holy and good, but it depended on Israel, and Israel could not keep it. So God promised a covenant that depended on Him. And after the quote, the writer draws the conclusion.

> *In saying "new," He has made the first obsolete; and what is growing obsolete and aging **is** near vanishing.* (Hebrews 8:13)

When Hebrews was written, the temple was still standing and the priests were still offering sacrifices. But the writer says the old covenant was already obsolete and near vanishing. Within a few years, in A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the temple, and the sacrifices stopped. They have not been offered since.

A Will That Takes Effect at Death

In Chapter 1 we saw that the Greek word for covenant, diatheke, could also mean a will. Hebrews uses that double meaning.

> *And because of this He is **the** mediator of a new covenant, so that, a death having taken place for redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where **there is** a covenant, **there is** necessity for the death of the one who made **it** to be established. For a covenant **is** firm over dead **ones**, since it never has force while the one who made **it** is living.* (Hebrews 9:15-17)

A will does nothing while the person who made it is alive. When he dies, everything in it becomes legally binding. Jesus died, and so the inheritance He promised is now ours. And unlike any other person who ever left a will, He rose from the dead to make sure it is carried out.

Once for All

The high priest under Sinai entered the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement, with blood of animals, for his own sins and the people's (Hebrews 9:7). The next year he had to do it again. The sacrifices never ended, because they never finished the job.

Jesus entered heaven itself, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood, once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-12, 24-26). Then He sat down.

> *And every priest indeed stands every day ministering and repeatedly offering the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at **the** right hand of God, from then on waiting until His enemies are placed **as** a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.* (Hebrews 10:11-14)

There were no chairs in the tabernacle. The priests' work was never done. Jesus sat down because His work was finished.

No More Offering for Sin

Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 a second time, and this time it focuses on the last line.

> *"This **is** the covenant which I will make with them after those days, says **the** Lord: putting My laws on their hearts, I will also inscribe them on their minds," **He then says**, "and their sins and their lawless deeds I will certainly not remember any more." Now where **there is** forgiveness of these, **there is** no longer an offering for sin.* (Hebrews 10:16-18)

That last sentence is one of the most freeing in the Bible. Where sins have been forgiven, there is no longer any offering for sin. Nothing more needs to be paid. If you trust Christ, you do not have to make up for your sins. You cannot add to what He did. You can only receive it.

Draw Near

Because of all this, Hebrews urges its readers not to drift back to the old covenant, but to draw near to God with confidence.

> *Having therefore, brothers, confidence for the entrance into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and* ***having*** *a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having* ***our*** *hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and* ***our*** *body washed with pure water.* (Hebrews 10:19-22)

And it closes with a blessing that names the covenant one more time: the God of peace brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus (Hebrews 13:20). The new covenant is eternal. It will never grow old.

Study Questions

1. Find as many uses of the word better in Hebrews as you can. What is Jesus better than?
2. Why could Jesus not be a priest under the covenant at Sinai? What kind of priest is He?
3. Read Hebrews 8:7-13. What was the fault with the first covenant?
4. How does the idea of a will help you understand the death of Jesus (Hebrews 9:15-17)?
5. Why did the priests stand, and why did Jesus sit down (Hebrews 10:11-14)?
6. Read Hebrews 10:18. Is there any sin you are still trying to pay for? What does this verse say to you?

Chapter 18: The Warnings of the New Covenant

> *Because of this we must give heed more abundantly to the things which have been heard, lest we drift away.*
>
> Hebrews 2:1 (SLB)

Hebrews is the most hopeful book in the Bible about the new covenant. It is also the most sobering. Woven through its chapters are five warnings, some of the strongest words anywhere in Scripture. If the new covenant is unconditional, resting on Christ alone, why would Hebrews warn its readers so sharply? This chapter takes those warnings head on.

The Five Warnings

Here they are, in order.

1. **Don't drift away** (Hebrews 2:1-4). If disobedience under the law brought a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?
2. **Don't harden your heart** (Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13). The generation that came out of Egypt did not enter God's rest because of unbelief. We have become partakers of Christ if we hold fast our confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:14).
3. **Don't fall away** (Hebrews 5:11 to 6:12). It is impossible to renew to repentance those who have tasted the heavenly gift and then fall away, since they are crucifying again the Son of God.
4. **Don't go on sinning willfully** (Hebrews 10:26-39). If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins remains.
5. **Don't refuse Him who speaks** (Hebrews 12:14-29). If those who refused Him who warned them on earth did not escape, much less will we escape if we turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

The Hardest Words

The fourth warning uses the word covenant itself.

> *For if we sin willingly after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire about to devour the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside **the** law of Moses dies without mercies on **the testimony of** two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will he be considered worthy of who has trampled on the Son of God, and has regarded as common the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?*
> (Hebrews 10:26-29)

This is a picture of someone who knew the truth, sat in the congregation, heard the gospel, and then turned his back on Christ for good, treating the blood of the new covenant as if it were nothing special. For that person, Hebrews says, there is no other sacrifice to turn to. If you reject the only sacrifice that can take away sin, there is nowhere else to go.

How Christians Have Read These Warnings

Sincere Christians read these passages in different ways. Here are the main views.

True believers can lose their salvation. Many Christians in the Wesleyan and Arminian traditions believe these warnings describe real believers who can fall away and be lost. They take the descriptions in Hebrews 6:4-5, enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit, as describing genuine conversion.

The warnings are about people who were never truly saved. Others believe these passages describe people who came close, who were in the church and saw the Spirit at work, but never truly trusted Christ. John describes such people: they went out from us, but they were not of us (1 John 2:19).

The warnings are real means God uses to keep His people. Others, while holding that true believers will never be lost, stress that God keeps His people precisely by warning them. The warnings are like the guardrails on a mountain road. They are real, and they keep you on the road. Those who are truly His heed them.

The warnings are about loss of reward, not salvation. Some see these passages as warning believers about God's discipline and the loss of reward, not about hell.

Where I Land

I believe that every person who truly belongs to Christ is kept by Him and will never be lost. Jesus said so as plainly as words can say it.

> *And I give them eternal life, and they will certainly never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given **them** to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch **them** out of the hand of My Father.* (John 10:28-29)

That is the new covenant. God promised to put His fear in their hearts so they would not turn away from Him (Jeremiah 32:40). He who began a good work in you will complete it (Philippians 1:6). The new covenant does not rest on our grip on God. It rests on His grip on us.

At the same time, I take the warnings with full seriousness, and I think the third and fourth views above belong together. The writer of Hebrews himself says, right after his hardest warning in chapter 6, that he is persuaded of better things concerning his readers, things that belong to salvation (Hebrews 6:9). And right after the warning in chapter 10, he says, "we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul" (Hebrews 10:39). The warnings are not meant to make true believers doubt. They are meant to keep anyone from treating Christ lightly, and to stir up the kind of faith that endures. Real faith perseveres. That is not how we earn our place in the covenant. It is the evidence that we are in it.

What to Do with the Warnings

So what should you do when you read Hebrews 6 or 10?

If you trust Christ and fear that you have fallen away, the very fact that you care is a good sign. The person Hebrews describes has hardened his heart and does not care. Come back to Jesus. His blood still speaks better things than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24).

If you have been drifting, take the warning to heart. Hebrews says to exhort one another every day, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13). Don't drift alone. Get back among God's people.

And if you have been sitting near the gospel for years, hearing it but never truly trusting Christ, these warnings are for you most of all. Don't neglect so great a salvation. There is no other covenant and no other sacrifice. Today is the day.

Study Questions

1. List the five warnings in Hebrews. Which one speaks most directly to you right now?
2. Read Hebrews 10:26-31. What does it mean to regard the blood of the covenant as common?
3. Describe the four ways Christians have read the warnings. What are the strengths of each?
4. How do John 10:28-29 and Jeremiah 32:40 fit with the warnings of Hebrews?
5. Read Hebrews 6:9 and 10:39. How does the writer himself view his readers?
6. Hebrews 3:13 says to encourage one another every day. Who could you encourage this week?

Chapter 19: Every Covenant Kept in Christ

> *And if you **are** Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise.*
>
> Galatians 3:29 (SLB)

In Part Two we walked through the covenants one at a time. Now I want to set them side by side and show you how Jesus answers every one. This is where the Bible stops looking like a collection of separate stories and starts looking like one story with one hero.

Translating the SLB word for word made me trace how Old Testament promises connect to Jesus. The promise to David of an eternal throne shows up in Luke 1:32-33, kept even when Israel's kings failed. Every promise God made finds its fulfillment in Christ.

The Seed of the Woman

God promised in the garden that the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). Jesus was born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). At the cross He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public display of them (Colossians 2:15). The final blow is still coming, when the devil is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). But the deciding blow has already been struck.

Noah: The World Preserved for Him

God promised Noah that He would hold back judgment and keep the seasons turning (Genesis 8:22). He did that so the Seed could come and the gospel could go out. Peter says God's patience in Noah's day and God's patience now have the same purpose: salvation (1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 3:9, 15). Peter even calls Noah's rescue through water a picture of the salvation that now comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:20-21).

Abraham: The One Seed

Here Paul makes one of the most important points in the New Testament.

> *Now to Abraham the promises were spoken, and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your seed," who is Christ.* (Galatians 3:16)

God promised the land, the nation, and the blessing to Abraham and his seed. Paul says that seed, in the deepest sense, is one Person: Christ. Every promise to Abraham comes to its goal in Jesus. And then Paul says that everyone who belongs to Christ, Jew or Gentile, is Abraham's seed and an heir of the promise (Galatians 3:29).

That is how Gentiles come into the blessing of Abraham. Not by becoming Jews. Not by being circumcised. By being joined to the one Seed, Jesus. Peter preached the same thing to the crowd in the temple.

> *You are sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His servant Jesus, sent Him, blessing you in turning away each* ***of you*** *from your wickednesses.* (Acts 3:25-26)

Notice "to you first." The blessing came first to Israel, then out to all nations. Paul says the gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16).

I want to be careful here, because this is where Christians begin to read the covenants differently. Galatians 3 tells us that Gentile believers share in the spiritual blessing of Abraham, being counted righteous by faith and receiving the Spirit (Galatians 3:6-9, 14). It does not say the promises God made to Abraham's physical descendants about the land and the nation have been cancelled or handed to someone else. We will look at that in Chapter 22.

Sinai: The Law Fulfilled

Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). He fulfilled the law in at least four ways.

He kept it perfectly. He was born under the law (Galatians 4:4), and He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22). He is the only person who ever kept the covenant at Sinai from the inside.

He took its curse. The law pronounced a curse on everyone who breaks it. Christ redeemed us from that curse by becoming a curse for us on the cross (Galatians 3:13).

He was what its shadows pointed to. He is the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), the High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), the sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:12), the true tabernacle where God lives among people (John 1:14), and the Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:9-10; Matthew 11:28).

He brought it to its end as a way of righteousness. Paul says Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4). The law was never a way to earn righteousness, but people had treated it that way. In Christ, that road is closed for good.

David: The King Who Lives Forever

God promised David a son on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16). Solomon died. So did every king after him. Only a King who never dies could make that promise come true. Jesus rose from the dead, and death no longer rules over Him (Romans 6:9). Peter said the resurrection was the proof that Jesus is the promised Son of David (Acts 2:29-32). Paul said the same in the synagogue at Antioch: God raised Jesus to give us the holy and sure blessings of David (Acts 13:34, quoting Isaiah 55:3).

The New Covenant: Signed in His Blood

Jesus did not just announce the new covenant. He is its Mediator (Hebrews 9:15), its Guarantee (Hebrews 7:22), and its sacrifice (Matthew 26:28). The forgiveness Jeremiah promised is ours because of His blood. The Spirit Ezekiel promised was poured out because He rose and ascended (John 7:39; Acts 2:33).

The Yes to Every Promise

Paul said it best.

> *For as many as **are the** promises of God, in Him **is** the Yes, and in Him the Amen, to God for glory through us.* (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Jesus is God's yes. Every promise God ever made finds its yes in Him. And our part is to say the Amen, to agree with God and trust Him. Paul said Christ became a servant to the Jewish people to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy (Romans 15:8-9). Both halves of that sentence matter. Jesus confirms God's promises to Israel, and He opens God's mercy to the nations.

A Covenant Chart in One Person

Covenant	What it promised	How Jesus answers it
The first promise	The Seed of the woman will crush the serpent	Born of a woman; defeated the devil at the cross (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:14)
Noah	The world preserved; God's patience	God's patience leads to salvation in Christ (2 Peter 3:9, 15)
Abraham	Land, seed, blessing for all nations	He is the one Seed; all who belong to Him are heirs (Galatians 3:16, 29)
Sinai	Law, priesthood, sacrifice	He kept it, took its curse, and fulfilled its shadows (Matthew 5:17; Galatians 3:13)
Land	Regathering and a new heart	He will return to gather and restore Israel (Matthew 24:31; Romans 11:26)
David	A Son on the throne forever	Raised from the dead, He will reign forever (Luke 1:32-33; Acts 2:30-32)
New	Forgiveness, the law on the heart, the Spirit	His blood, His Spirit, His priesthood (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 10:14-18)

Study Questions

1. Which covenant's fulfillment in Jesus surprised you most in this chapter? Why?
2. Read Galatians 3:16 and 3:29 together. How can the seed be one Person and also many people?
3. What does "to you first" mean in Acts 3:26 and Romans 1:16?
4. List the four ways Jesus fulfilled the law. Which one means the most to you?
5. Why could only a King who rose from the dead keep the promise to David?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 1:20. What does it look like for you to say "Amen" to God's promises this week?

Chapter 20: Living Under the New Covenant

> *who also made us sufficient **as** ministers of a new covenant, not of **the** letter but of **the** Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 3:6 (SLB)

If the covenant at Sinai has been made obsolete, what does that mean for how Christians live? Do we ignore the Ten Commandments? Do we keep the Sabbath? Can we eat anything we want? And if we are not under the law, what keeps us from living however we please? Paul faced every one of these questions, and his answers are as practical today as they were then.

Ministers of a New Covenant

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul compares the two covenants side by side. The old one was written in letters on stone. The new one is written by the Spirit on human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3). The old one he calls the ministry of death and of condemnation. The new one he calls the ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness (2 Corinthians 3:7-9).

> *who also made us sufficient **as** ministers of a new covenant, not of **the** letter but of **the** Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive. Now if the ministry of death, in letters engraved in stones, came about in glory, so that the sons of Israel were not able to look intently into the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, which was being brought to nothing, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more in glory?* (2 Corinthians 3:6-8)

Paul is not saying the law was evil. He says it came with glory, so much glory that Moses' face shone. But it could only condemn. It could tell you what to do, but it could not give you the life to do it. The Spirit gives life.

Not Under Law, but Under Grace

Paul says it as plainly as it can be said.

> *For sin will not rule over you, for you are not under law but under grace.* (Romans 6:14)

To be under law means to live under the covenant at Sinai as the rule over your life, trying to be right with God by keeping it. Paul says that is not where a Christian stands. We died to the law through the body of Christ, so that we might belong to Another, to Him who was raised from the dead (Romans 7:4).

Then Paul immediately asks the obvious question: shall we sin, then, because we are not under law but under grace? "May it not be!" (Romans 6:15). Grace is not permission to sin. It is power over sin. The very same verse says sin will not rule over you. The law demanded obedience but could not produce it. Grace produces it.

What About the Ten Commandments?

This is where many Christians get confused, so let me be as clear as I can.

The Ten Commandments were the heart of the covenant at Sinai, and that covenant has been replaced. But nine of the ten are repeated in the New Testament as part of how Christians are to live. Don't worship other gods (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). Flee idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14). Don't take God's name lightly (James 5:12). Honor your father and mother (Ephesians 6:1-3). Don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet (Romans 13:9; Ephesians 4:25, 28; Colossians 3:5).

So we keep those, not because we are under Sinai, but because they show God's own character, and the Spirit writes that character on our hearts. Paul says love fulfills the law (Romans 13:8-10). He calls it the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21). Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment: love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34). That is a higher standard, not a lower one.

What About the Sabbath?

The one commandment not repeated for Christians is the Sabbath. That is not an accident. In Chapter 8 we saw that God called the Sabbath the sign of the covenant between Him and the sons of Israel (Exodus 31:16-17). When that covenant was replaced, its sign went with it.

> *Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink or in respect of a feast or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of the* ***things*** *coming, but the body* ***is*** *of Christ.* (Colossians 2:16-17)

Paul says the Sabbath was a shadow, and the body, the real thing, belongs to Christ. Our true rest is in Him (Hebrews 4:9-10; Matthew 11:28-30). From the beginning, Christians gathered on the first day of the week, the day Jesus rose (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). Paul says one person regards one day above another, and another regards every day alike, and each should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5).

Rest is still God's good gift, and the rhythm of six days of work and one day of rest is wise. Many Christians honor the Lord's Day as a day of worship and rest, and I think that is a good thing. But no Christian should judge another over it, and no one is saved or lost by keeping it.

What About Food Laws?

The food laws at Sinai set Israel apart from the nations (Leviticus 20:24-26). Jesus said that nothing going into a person from outside can defile him, because it goes into the stomach and passes out of the body, "cleansing all the foods" (Mark 7:18-19). Many English Bibles take those last words as Mark's own comment: Jesus declared all foods clean. God showed Peter the same thing in a vision before sending him to the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10:9-16, 28). When the church leaders met in Jerusalem, they did not put Gentile believers under the law of Moses. They asked only that they avoid a few things that would deeply offend Jewish believers and that were tied to idolatry and immorality (Acts 15:19-20, 28-29).

What About Jewish Believers?

Here is a point that is easy to miss. The New Testament never told Jewish believers they had to stop being Jewish. Paul circumcised Timothy, whose mother was Jewish (Acts 16:1-3). He joined four Jewish believers who were finishing a Nazirite vow, paid their expenses, and went with them to the temple to show he had not abandoned the customs of his people (Acts 21:20-26). He became as a Jew to win Jews (1 Corinthians 9:20).

What the New Testament forbids is making those customs a requirement for salvation, or forcing them on Gentiles. That was the whole fight in Galatians (Galatians 2:3-5; 5:2-4). A Jewish believer may keep the feasts and customs of his people as a matter of heritage and freedom. A Gentile believer is free not to. Neither one is more saved than the other (Galatians 3:28).

Walking by the Spirit

So what guides a Christian's life, if not the law of Sinai? Paul's answer is the Spirit God promised in the new covenant.

> *For the inability of the law, in that it was weak through the flesh: God, having sent His own Son in **the** likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to **the** flesh but according to **the** Spirit.* (Romans 8:3-4)

The righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us, not by us trying harder, but by the Spirit living in us. Paul lists the fruit the Spirit grows: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And he adds, "against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). No law ever had to forbid the fruit of the Spirit.

Study Questions

1. Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-18. Make two lists: what Paul says about the old covenant and what he says about the new.
2. What does it mean to be under law? What does it mean to be under grace?
3. Why is grace not a license to sin (Romans 6:1-2, 14-15)?
4. Which of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament? Why is the Sabbath treated differently?
5. How should Jewish and Gentile believers treat each other's customs (Romans 14:1-6; Galatians 5:1-6)?
6. Read Galatians 5:16-25. Which fruit of the Spirit do you most need Him to grow in you right now?

Chapter 21: Gentiles Brought Near

> *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ.*
>
> Ephesians 2:13 (SLB)

Most people reading this book are not Jewish. If that is you, then everything in the last few chapters raises a personal question. The covenants were made with Abraham, with Israel, with David. Where do I fit? Paul answers that question in two great passages: Ephesians 2 and Romans 11.

Where We Started

Paul does not flatter his Gentile readers. He reminds them where they came from.

> *Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in **the** flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by what is called "Circumcision" in **the** flesh, made by hands, that you were at that time apart from Christ, having been alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise, not having hope and without God in the world.* (Ephesians 2:11-12)

Look at that list. Apart from Christ. Alienated from Israel. Strangers to the covenants of the promise. No hope. Without God in the world. That was every Gentile before Jesus. Not because God did not care about the nations. We saw in Chapters 4 and 5 that He did. But the covenants of promise had been given to Israel, and the nations stood outside them.

Brought Near by the Blood

> *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ.* (Ephesians 2:13)

That one sentence changes everything. You who were far away have been brought near, by the blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant.

Then Paul goes further.

> *For He Himself is our peace, who made both one and broke down the middle wall of the barrier, having abolished the hostility in His flesh, the law of the commandments in ordinances, so that He might create the two in Himself into one new man, making peace, and might reconcile both in one body to God through the cross, having killed the hostility by it.* (Ephesians 2:14-16)

In the temple in Jerusalem, there was a stone barrier separating the Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts. Archaeologists have found two of the warning inscriptions that hung on it, written in Greek, warning any foreigner who went past that he would have himself to blame for his death. The first was found in 1871 and is in a museum in Istanbul; a broken piece of a second was found in 1935 and is in Jerusalem. Josephus describes the same stone barrier, with pillars set along it in Greek and Latin "declaring the law of purity," that "no foreigner should go within that sanctuary" (Jewish War 5.5.2,

Whiston translation). Paul's readers would have known exactly what he meant by the middle wall of the barrier. In Christ, that wall is gone.

One New Man

Notice what Paul says Christ made: not Gentiles turned into Jews, and not Jews turned into Gentiles, but "one new man" out of the two (Ephesians 2:15). That is the church. A Jewish believer and a Gentile believer are brothers and sisters, members of the same body, with the same access to the Father by the same Spirit (Ephesians 2:18-19).

Paul calls this a mystery, something God had not made known in earlier generations but has now revealed.

> *which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in **the** Spirit: **that** the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel* (Ephesians 3:5-6)

That word mystery is important for Part Four. The Old Testament clearly said Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham's seed. What it did not reveal was that Jews and Gentiles would be joined as equals into one body, the church, during the time between Christ's first and second coming. That body was something new. Paul says it was hidden in God for ages (Ephesians 3:9).

The Olive Tree

In Romans 11, Paul uses a different picture: an olive tree. The tree's root is the covenant promises God made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some of the natural branches, Jewish people who rejected Jesus, were broken off because of unbelief. Wild branches, Gentile believers, were grafted in by faith.

> *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them and became a fellow partaker of the root and of the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. But if you boast, **it is** not you **who** support the root, but the root **supports** you.* (Romans 11:17-18)

Paul gives Gentile believers a strong warning: don't boast. You do not support the root. The root supports you. You stand only by faith, so do not be proud, but fear (Romans 11:20). And God is able to graft the natural branches back in, which Paul says is even more natural (Romans 11:23-24).

Sadly, much of church history ignored this warning. For centuries, many Christians treated Jewish people with contempt, blamed them as a people for the death of Jesus, and even persecuted them in Christ's name. That was a terrible sin. The Bible says the Lord Jesus laid down His life of His own accord (John 10:17-18), and that our sins put Him on the cross (Isaiah 53:5-6). Gentile Christians owe the Jewish people a debt, not a grudge. Paul says the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things (Romans 15:27).

What We Share and What We Don't

So what exactly do Gentile believers share with Israel? Here is how I put it together.

We share the spiritual blessings of Abraham. Righteousness by faith (Galatians 3:6-9). The promised Spirit (Galatians 3:14). Being children of God and heirs (Galatians 3:26-29; 4:7).

We share the blessings of the new covenant. Paul called himself a minister of the new covenant to a largely Gentile church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 3:6). The forgiveness, the new heart, the Spirit, and knowing God are ours now in Christ.

We do not take over Israel's national promises. Paul never says Gentile believers inherit the land of Canaan, or that the church becomes the nation of Israel. In Romans 9:4-5, written after the cross, he still says the covenants and the promises belong to his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Israelites. He uses the present tense.

> *who are Israelites, whose **is** the adoption as sons, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service, and the promises; whose **are** the fathers, and from whom **is** the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed to the ages. Amen.* (Romans 9:4-5)

That is the key to everything in Part Four. The church shares in Israel's spiritual blessings without replacing Israel. Paul's olive tree has one root and two kinds of branches. The wild branches have not become natural branches. They have been grafted into the same tree.

Study Questions

1. Read Ephesians 2:11-12. Which phrase best describes where you were before Christ?
2. What was the middle wall of the barrier? What did Christ do to it?
3. What is the one new man in Ephesians 2:15? How should that shape the way Christians of different backgrounds treat each other?
4. Read Romans 11:16-24. Who is the root? Who are the natural branches? Who are the wild branches?
5. Why does Paul warn Gentile believers not to boast? How has the church failed to listen?
6. What blessings do Gentile believers share with Israel? What promises, according to Romans 9:4-5, still belong to Israel?

Part Four: Israel, the Church, and the Days Ahead

Chapter 22: Has God Finished with Israel?

> *For the gifts and the calling of God **are** irrevocable.*
>
> Romans 11:29 (SLB)

Here is the question we have been carrying since Chapter 2. God made covenants with Israel. Most of Israel rejected Jesus. The church today is mostly Gentile. So has God moved on? Has the church taken Israel's place in God's plan? Many sincere Christians believe it has. I don't, and in this chapter I want to show you why, mostly from Paul's own words in Romans 9 to 11.

I hold that God's promises to Israel will still be kept (Romans 11:1-2, 28-29). If God could cancel what He swore to Israel because of their failures, how could I be sure He would not cancel His promises to me after mine? I know how many times I have fallen short. God's gifts and calling are irrevocable.

The View That the Church Replaced Israel

Let me state the other view fairly first. It is often called **replacement theology**, though most who hold it prefer the word **fulfillment**. In this view, Israel's national role ended when the nation rejected the Messiah. The promises God made to Israel are now fulfilled in Christ and in the church, which is the true Israel. Jewish people can still be saved, the same way anyone is, by faith in Jesus, but there is no separate future for Israel as a nation.

People who hold this view point to verses like these. Jesus told the leaders of Israel that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to a nation producing its fruit (Matthew 21:43). Paul said not all who are descended from Israel are Israel (Romans 9:6), and he called the church "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16), at least in one reading of that verse. Peter applied Israel's titles at Sinai to the church (1 Peter 2:9). And in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28).

Those are real verses, and they deserve real answers. Here is how I read them. Matthew 21:43 was spoken to the chief priests and Pharisees, the leaders who were rejecting Jesus, about the kingdom being taken from that generation of leaders, and the passage says they knew He was speaking about them (Matthew 21:45). Romans 9:6 says there is a believing Israel within the nation, not that Gentiles become Israel. Galatians 6:16 can just as well be read as a blessing on Jewish believers, the Israel of God, alongside the Gentile believers Paul had been addressing. First Peter was written, at least in large part, to Jewish believers scattered abroad (1 Peter 1:1), and even if it includes Gentiles, sharing a calling is not the same as replacing a nation. And Galatians 3:28 is about how we are saved and how we stand before God, not about erasing every difference. There is still male and female in the church, after all.

Paul's Own Answer

The clearest way to settle this is to let Paul answer it himself, because he asked the exact question.

> *I say then, did God reject His people? May it not be! For I also am an Israelite, of **the** seed of Abraham, of **the** tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject His people whom He foreknew. Or do you*

> *not know what the Scripture says in Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying* (Romans 11:1-2)

"May it not be!" is the strongest denial Paul knows how to make. And his first proof is himself. He is an Israelite. God has always kept a believing remnant within Israel, as He did in Elijah's day, when seven thousand had not bowed to Baal (Romans 11:2-5).

Then Paul asks a second question. Did Israel stumble so as to fall for good?

> *I say then, did they stumble so that they might fall? May it not be! But by their trespass salvation **has come** to the Gentiles, to provoke them to jealousy. But if their trespass **is the** riches of **the** world, and their failure **the** riches of **the** Gentiles, how much more their fullness?* (Romans 11:11-12)

Notice the words "how much more their fullness." Paul expects a future fullness for Israel, a day when the nation as a whole turns to Christ, and he says that day will be even greater riches for the world.

The Mystery of Israel's Hardening

Then Paul tells the Gentile believers in Rome something he does not want them to miss.

> *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of this mystery, so that you may not be wise in yourselves, that a hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved, just as it has been written, "The One who delivers will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; and this **is** the covenant from Me to them, when I take away their sins."* (Romans 11:25-27)

Look at each piece. A hardening has come on Israel, but only in part, since there have always been Jewish believers. It is temporary: until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And then "all Israel will be saved." Paul is not talking about every Jewish person who ever lived. He is talking about the nation as a whole at a future time, as opposed to the small remnant of his own day. And he grounds it in the new covenant: "this is the covenant from Me to them, when I take away their sins," quoting Isaiah 59:20-21 and 27:9.

Enemies and Beloved at the Same Time

Paul ends with two verses that explain Israel's place today better than anything else I know.

> *As regards the gospel, **they are** enemies on account of you; but as regards the election, **they are** beloved on account of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God **are** irrevocable.* (Romans 11:28-29)

As regards the gospel, most of Israel is opposed to it right now, and that opposition has opened the door to the Gentiles. But as regards God's choosing, they are still beloved, because of the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And then the verse I put at the top of this chapter: the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. God does not take back what He gives. He does not cancel what He calls.

If God could cancel His promises to Israel because of their unbelief, what would stop Him from canceling His promises to you because of yours? The same faithfulness that keeps Israel keeps the church.

Still Israel in the New Testament

One more thing is worth noticing. The New Testament uses the word Israel about seventy times. In almost every case, it clearly means the Jewish people or the nation, not the church. Even after Pentecost, the apostles kept speaking of Israel and the church as different groups. Paul told the Corinthians to give no offense to Jews, to Greeks, or to the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:32). Three groups, side by side. And Paul's heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel was for their salvation (Romans 10:1). You don't pray that way for a people God has finished with.

> *Brothers, the desire of my heart and the supplication to God on behalf of Israel is for salvation.*
> (Romans 10:1)

Holding This Rightly

Let me say two things carefully.

First, believing that God has a future for Israel does not mean Jewish people can be saved apart from Jesus. Paul wept over his people precisely because they were missing their Messiah (Romans 9:1-3; 10:1-4). There is one gospel for everyone (Romans 1:16; Acts 4:12).

Second, believing God has a future for Israel does not mean every action of the modern State of Israel is right. God's faithfulness to His promise is not an endorsement of any government. Israel's prophets were the first to call their own nation to account. We can love the Jewish people, pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), and still be honest about right and wrong.

Study Questions

1. State the replacement or fulfillment view in your own words. Which verses do people use to support it?
2. Read Romans 11:1-6. How does Paul answer the question, "Did God reject His people?"
3. Read Romans 11:11-15. What does Paul say Israel's fullness will bring?
4. Read Romans 11:25-27. What is temporary? What will happen after the fullness of the Gentiles comes in?
5. Romans 11:28-29 says Israel is both enemies and beloved. How can both be true?
6. Why does God's faithfulness to Israel matter for your own assurance as a believer?
7. How can you pray for Jewish people this week (Romans 10:1; Psalm 122:6)?

Chapter 23: Three Ways Christians Read the Covenants

> *Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, who received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures every day **to see** if these things might be so.*
>
> Acts 17:11 (SLB)

By now you have seen that Christians who love the Bible and believe every word of it still read the covenants differently. That is not a reason for despair, and it is not a reason to stop studying. It is a reason to study carefully, hold our conclusions humbly, and treat each other kindly. In this chapter I lay out the three main frameworks as fairly as I can, and then I tell you where I stand and why.

Covenant Theology

Covenant theology is the historic view of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It was shaped in the 1500s and 1600s and is set out in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689).

Its main points are these.

- God made a **covenant of works** with Adam, promising life for obedience. Adam broke it.
- God then made a **covenant of grace**, first announced in Genesis 3:15, to save sinners through Christ. All the covenants after the fall, from Abraham through the new covenant, are different stages of this one covenant of grace.
- Many also speak of a **covenant of redemption** made within the Trinity before creation, in which the Father gave a people to the Son.
- The church is the continuation and fulfillment of Israel. There is one people of God across both Testaments.
- Most covenant theologians, though not all, believe the promises of land and kingdom are fulfilled spiritually in Christ, the church, and the new earth, rather than in a future national restoration of Israel. Most hold to amillennialism, the view that the thousand years of Revelation 20 describe the present age.

Strengths: Covenant theology sees the unity of the Bible clearly. It rightly stresses that salvation has always been by grace through faith, and that Christ is the center of all Scripture.

Questions people raise: The covenants of works, grace, and redemption are not named in the Bible as such; they are theological summaries. And the view has a hard time explaining Romans 11:25-29, the land promises repeated after Joshua, and the many places where the New Testament still distinguishes Israel from the church.

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism took shape in the 1800s, especially through John Nelson Darby, and spread widely through the Scofield Reference Bible (1909) and schools like Dallas Theological Seminary. Many Bible-believing churches in America hold it today.

Its main points are these.

- God has worked with people in different ways in different periods of history, called dispensations, though salvation has always been by grace through faith.
- The Bible's covenants, especially the promises to Abraham, David, and Israel in the new covenant, should be read according to their plain, normal meaning. Promises made to Israel about land and kingdom will be kept to Israel.
- **Israel and the church are distinct.** The church, the body of Christ in which Jews and Gentiles are one new man, began at Pentecost and is the mystery Paul says was hidden in past ages (Ephesians 3:5-6).
- God will restore the nation of Israel in the future, at the return of Christ.
- Most dispensationalists are premillennial (Christ returns before a literal thousand-year reign on earth) and pre-tribulational (the church is caught up before the seven-year tribulation).

Strengths: Dispensationalism takes the Old Testament promises at face value, gives Romans 11 its full weight, and explains why the New Testament keeps Israel and the church distinct.

Questions people raise: Some older dispensational teachers drew the line between Israel and the church so sharply that they seemed to teach two ways of salvation, or set aside parts of the New Testament, like the Sermon on the Mount, as not for the church. Most dispensationalists today reject those ideas, and I reject them too. There is one way of salvation, by grace through faith in Christ, in every age.

Progressive Covenantalism and Progressive Dispensationalism

Two newer views try to stand between the first two.

Progressive dispensationalism, developed in the 1980s and 1990s by scholars like Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy, keeps a future for national Israel but sees more continuity between Israel and the church. It teaches that Jesus has already begun His reign as Son of David from heaven, with its full form still ahead on earth.

Progressive covenantalism, set out by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum in *Kingdom through Covenant* (2012), and the related **new covenant theology**, see the covenants unfolding step by step toward Christ. They stress that the new covenant is truly new, not a renewed Sinai. Most of them see Christ Himself as the true Israel, and the church as Israel's fulfillment in Him, usually without a separate national future.

A Chart of the Views

Question	Covenant theology	Dispensationalism	Progressive covenantalism
How are the covenants related?	Stages of one covenant of grace	Distinct covenants, each kept as promised	Unfolding covenants fulfilled in Christ
Is the church the new Israel?	Yes, the continuation of Israel	No, distinct from Israel	Christ is the true Israel; the church is in Him
Future for national Israel?	Usually no	Yes	Usually no
The land promises	Fulfilled spiritually or in the new earth	Kept to Israel in the coming kingdom	Fulfilled in the new creation
Common view of the thousand years	Amillennial	Premillennial	Varies
Common view of the Rapture	Same event as the second coming	Before the tribulation	Varies

Where I Stand

I hold the dispensational view, and especially the conviction at its heart: that God will keep His covenant promises to Israel as He made them, and that Israel and the church are distinct, though both are saved by the same Christ through the same faith. Here are my reasons, most of which you have seen in earlier chapters.

1. God made His promises to Abraham and David unconditionally, and swore them by an oath (Genesis 15:17-18; Psalm 89:34-35; Hebrews 6:17-18). An oath sworn by God cannot be quietly redefined.
2. God tied His commitment to Israel as a nation to the sun, the moon, and the stars (Jeremiah 31:35-37; 33:20-26).
3. The prophets promised a restored Israel in the land long after Joshua and Solomon (Amos 9:14-15; Ezekiel 36 to 37).
4. Paul, after the cross, says the covenants still belong to Israel (Romans 9:4), that God has not rejected His people (Romans 11:1-2), that a fullness and a national salvation are coming (Romans 11:12, 25-27), and that God's calling is irrevocable (Romans 11:29).
5. When the disciples asked the risen Jesus whether He would restore the kingdom to Israel at that time, He did not say the idea was wrong. He said it was not for them to know the times or seasons (Acts 1:6-7).
6. Paul calls the church, Jews and Gentiles as one body, a mystery not made known in earlier generations (Ephesians 3:5-6). Israel was not hidden. So the church cannot simply be Israel continued.

I hold all of this with an open Bible and, I hope, a humble heart. Some of the finest Christians in history have been covenant theologians, and I owe them a great deal. We agree on the things that matter most: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His death for our sins and bodily resurrection, salvation by grace through faith alone, and His coming again. Where we differ, we should keep studying together, the way the Bereans did.

Study Questions

1. Summarize covenant theology in two or three sentences. What does it see most clearly?
2. Summarize dispensationalism in two or three sentences. What does it see most clearly?
3. What problems have some older forms of dispensationalism had? Why does the author reject them?
4. Look at the chart. Where do the views agree? Where do they disagree most?
5. Which of the author's six reasons do you find strongest? Which do you want to study more?
6. How can Christians who disagree on these questions still serve together and love one another?

Chapter 24: Why the Covenants Matter for the Rapture

> *because God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*
>
> 1 Thessalonians 5:9 (SLB)

When people hear “end times,” they often think of charts, dates, and arguments. I understand that. But the timing of the Rapture is not just a puzzle for people who like charts. It grows straight out of the covenants. If God has a separate future for Israel, and if the church is a distinct body with its own promises, then the Bible’s description of the last days starts to fit together. In this chapter I want to show you how.

My Revelation and Daniel Bible studies go through these passages verse by verse. Here I want to focus on the covenant reasons behind the view.

What the Rapture Is

The word rapture comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where Paul says believers will be caught up, or in the SLB “caught away,” to meet the Lord in the air. The Greek word is **harpazo** (say it har-PAD-zo), meaning to snatch or seize suddenly.

> *because the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout of command, with **the** voice of an archangel and with **the** trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are living, who remain, will be caught away together with them in **the** clouds to meet the Lord in **the** air; and so we will always be with **the** Lord.* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Every Bible-believing Christian agrees this event will happen. The question is when. Will the church be caught up before the seven years of tribulation, in the middle, near the end, or at the very moment of Christ’s return in glory?

I believe it happens before the tribulation. Here is how the covenants lead there.

Reason One: Daniel’s Seventieth Week Is About Israel

In Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel told Daniel that seventy sevens, seventy units of seven years, had been decreed on “your people and on your holy city” (Daniel 9:24). Daniel’s people were Israel. His holy city was Jerusalem.

> *Seventy sevens have been decreed on your people and on your holy city, to put an end to the transgression, and to complete sin, and to atone for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up vision and prophet, and to anoint a holy of holies.* (Daniel 9:24)

Gabriel said sixty-nine of those sevens would run until an anointed one would be cut off (Daniel 9:25-26). Jesus was crucified right on that schedule, and soon after, as Gabriel said, the people of a coming prince destroyed the city and the sanctuary, which the Romans did in A.D. 70. But the seventieth seven, the last

seven years, has not happened yet. Daniel 9:27 describes it, and Jesus pointed to it when He spoke of the abomination of desolation "spoken of through Daniel the prophet" as still future (Matthew 24:15).

So between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, there is a gap, and we are living in it. That gap is the church age. The church was the mystery not revealed to Daniel (Ephesians 3:5-6). The seventy weeks are about Israel and Jerusalem. It makes sense that when God resumes His countdown for Israel, the church, which has its own calling, will already have been taken out.

Reason Two: A Covenant Made with Death

Look at what Daniel says the coming prince will do.

> *And he will make a covenant strong for the many **for** one seven; and **in** the middle of the seven he will cause sacrifice and grain offering to cease; and on a wing of abominations **will be** one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, and what has been decided will be poured out on the one who is desolate.* (Daniel 9:27)

The final seven years begin when a ruler makes a covenant strong with the many. Then, in the middle of the seven, he breaks it, stops the sacrifices, and sets up an abomination. Most pre-tribulation teachers see this as a treaty between the coming world ruler, often called the Antichrist, and the nation of Israel.

Think about that against everything we have studied. Israel's whole story is a story of covenants with God. And in the last days, many in Israel will put their trust in a false covenant with a man, the very thing Isaiah warned against when he rebuked Jerusalem's rulers for making a covenant with death (Isaiah 28:14-18). That false covenant will be broken, and the time of distress Jeremiah called "a time of distress for Jacob" will follow.

> *Alas! For that day **is** great, so that **there is** none like it; and it **is** a time of distress for Jacob, and from it he will be saved.* (Jeremiah 30:7)

Notice whose distress it is. Jacob's. Israel's. Jeremiah 30 is full of promises to restore Israel and Judah to their land (Jeremiah 30:3), and verse 7 says Jacob will be saved out of it. The tribulation is, first of all, about God bringing Israel to the end of itself, so that the nation will finally look to the One they pierced.

Reason Three: The Church Is Not Appointed to Wrath

The tribulation is a time of God's wrath poured out on a rebellious world (Revelation 6:16-17; 15:1; 16:1). But God has promised the church something different.

> *because God did not appoint us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Thessalonians 5:9)

Paul says the Thessalonians had turned to God to wait for His Son from heaven, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). And Jesus promised the faithful church in Philadelphia that He would keep them from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world.

> *Because you kept the word of My endurance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world, to test those who dwell on the earth.*
> (Revelation 3:10)

Jesus did not say He would keep them through the hour. He said He would keep them from it. Under the new covenant, Christians are fully forgiven, with no more offering for sin (Hebrews 10:18). God disciplines His children, and Christians suffer persecution in every age (John 16:33; 2 Timothy 3:12). But the wrath of the tribulation is judgment, and Jesus already bore God's judgment for those who belong to Him.

Reason Four: The Church Is Missing from the Tribulation Chapters

In Revelation 1 to 3, the word church appears again and again, nineteen times. Jesus speaks to seven churches. Then in Revelation 4, John is called up to heaven, "Come up here," and from Revelation 4 to 18, where the judgments of the tribulation are described, the church is never mentioned on earth. Instead we see the 144,000 sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel (Revelation 7:4-8), and a woman, Israel, protected in the wilderness (Revelation 12:6, 13-17). The focus has shifted back to Israel, just as Daniel's seventieth week would lead us to expect.

I want to be honest that this is an argument from silence, and an argument from silence can only go so far. Revelation does speak of saints during that time (Revelation 13:7), and I believe those are people saved during the tribulation itself, after the church has been taken. But when the silence fits everything else, it carries weight.

Reason Five: Two Different Comings Described

The Bible describes Christ's return in two very different ways. In one, He comes for His people, they meet Him in the air, and He takes them to His Father's house (John 14:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). There is no mention of judgment on the earth. In the other, He comes with His people, His feet stand on the Mount of Olives, and He judges the nations and sets up His kingdom (Zechariah 14:4-5; Matthew 25:31-32; Revelation 19:11-16).

Pre-tribulation teachers see these as two stages of one return: first the Rapture, before the tribulation, then the glorious appearing, after it. That also explains how there can be people still alive on the earth in natural bodies to enter the thousand-year kingdom (Isaiah 65:20; Matthew 25:31-34). If every believer were caught up and changed at the very end, who would be left to populate the kingdom?

Fair Words for Other Views

Godly Christians hold the mid-tribulation, pre-wrath, and post-tribulation views. Post-tribulation teachers point out that the church has always suffered and that Jesus told His disciples to endure (Matthew 24:13). They see one single return at the end. Those are serious arguments, and my aim is not to win a fight. The Bible gives us enough to make a careful judgment, and I have made mine, but I hold it with love for those who see it differently. We all agree on the most important thing: Jesus is coming back, and we need to be ready.

The Covenant Reason, in One Sentence

Here is the whole chapter in a sentence. Because God made unconditional covenants with Israel that He has not finished keeping, and because the church is a distinct body brought in during the gap in Daniel's seventy weeks, the last seven years return to God's dealings with Israel, and the church, not appointed to wrath, will be caught up to be with the Lord before it begins.

Study Questions

1. What does the word rapture mean? Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. What comfort does Paul give?
2. Read Daniel 9:24-27. Who are the seventy weeks about? Why does the author believe there is a gap before the last week?
3. What covenant will the coming prince make (Daniel 9:27)? How does it contrast with God's covenants?
4. Read Jeremiah 30:4-11. Whose time of distress is it? What does God promise at the end of it?
5. How do 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9 and Revelation 3:10 support a Rapture before the tribulation?
6. What are the strongest arguments for the other views? How should we treat Christians who hold them?
7. If Jesus came today, would you be ready? What would you want to change?

Chapter 25: Every Promise Kept

> *And I heard a loud voice out of heaven, saying, "Look, the tabernacle of God **is** with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them, their God."*
>
> Revelation 21:3 (SLB)

We have followed God's covenants from the garden to the cross and into the church age. Now we look ahead to the day every one of them is kept in full. The Bible ends not with a vague hope, but with specific promises about a land, a nation, a throne, a city, and a new creation. God will keep every one of them, to the letter.

Revelation 21:12-14 puts the twelve tribes of Israel on the gates and the twelve apostles on the foundations. Neither erases the other. That picture gives me peace. God finishes everything He starts.

Israel Looks on Him

At the end of the tribulation, when the nations gather against Jerusalem, God says He will pour out on the house of David and the people of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.

> *And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplications; and they will look to Me, **to Him** whom they have pierced; and they will mourn over Him like a mourning over the only **son**, and **they will** show bitterness over Him as **one** shows bitterness over the firstborn.* (Zechariah 12:10)

This is the moment the land covenant and the new covenant meet. A nation that has rejected its Messiah for two thousand years will look at Him, recognize the wounds, and mourn. Jesus told Jerusalem, "you will by no means see Me from now on until you say, 'Blessed is the One coming in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:39). That day is coming. Zechariah says a fountain will be opened for the house of David for sin and impurity (Zechariah 13:1). Paul called it the day when all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).

The King Comes to Jerusalem

Then Christ returns in glory.

> *And His feet will stand on that day on the Mount of Olives, which **is** before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split from its middle toward the east and toward the west **into** a very great valley; and half of the mountain will move toward the north, and half of it toward the south.* (Zechariah 14:4)

The angels told the disciples at the ascension that Jesus would come back the same way they saw Him go (Acts 1:11), and He went up from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12). He will come back to it. He will defeat the armies gathered against Him (Revelation 19:11-21), bind Satan (Revelation 20:1-3), and begin His reign.

> *And the LORD will be King over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one, and His name one.* (Zechariah 14:9)

The Thousand-Year Kingdom

Revelation 20 says Christ's people will reign with Him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4-6). I believe this is a real kingdom on this earth, after Christ returns and before the new heavens and new earth. Christians call it the millennium, from the Latin for a thousand years.

In that kingdom, the covenants come together.

David's throne. The Son of David sits on His throne and reigns over the house of Jacob, as Gabriel promised (Luke 1:32-33). The apostles sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes (Matthew 19:28).

The land. Israel lives securely in the land God swore to Abraham, never to be uprooted again (Amos 9:15; Ezekiel 37:25).

The new covenant. The whole nation knows the LORD, from the least to the greatest, with His law on their hearts and His Spirit within them (Jeremiah 31:34; Ezekiel 36:27).

The blessing of the nations. The nations stream to Jerusalem to learn God's ways, and war ends (Isaiah 2:2-4). The promise to Abraham that all families of the earth would be blessed reaches its widest reach yet.

> *And many peoples will come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us from His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion **the** law will go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations and will decide for many peoples, and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning knives; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they will not learn war again.* (Isaiah 2:3-4)

Christians hold three main views of Revelation 20. Premillennialists, like me, believe Christ returns before a literal thousand-year reign. Amillennialists believe the thousand years describe the present age, with Christ reigning from heaven now. Postmillennialists believe the gospel will gradually bring a long age of peace before Christ returns. All three are held by sincere believers. I hold the premillennial view mainly because it lets the covenant promises to Israel and David be kept the way they were made, and because Revelation 19 and 20 read as a sequence: Christ returns, Satan is bound, and then the saints reign.

The Final Judgment

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time, leads one last rebellion, and is defeated and thrown into the lake of fire forever (Revelation 20:7-10). Then comes the great white throne, where the dead are judged according to their works, and anyone not found written in the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). The covenant with Noah promised God's patience. It never promised that sin would go unjudged. On that day, God's patience ends, and His justice is complete.

God with Us Forever

And then John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God.

> *And I heard a loud voice out of heaven, saying, "Look, the tabernacle of God **is** with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them, their God."* (Revelation 21:3)

Listen to the words. "They will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them, their God." That is the covenant formula we have seen since Genesis 17:7: I will be God to them, and they will be My people. Every covenant God ever made was aiming at this moment.

And look at the city itself. Its twelve gates carry the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Its twelve foundations carry the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

> *having a great and high wall, having twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names inscribed, which are **those** of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel: on **the** east three gates, on **the** north three gates, on **the** south three gates, and on **the** west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*
> (Revelation 21:12-14)

I find that beautiful. In the eternal city, Israel and the church are both named, side by side, in the same walls. Neither erases the other. Both are there because of the Lamb.

The curse that began in Genesis 3 is gone (Revelation 22:3). The tree of life is back (Revelation 22:2). The Seed of the woman has crushed the serpent. And God's people see His face (Revelation 22:4).

Not One Word Failed

When Joshua was old, he told Israel that not one word had fallen of all the good words the LORD had spoken; all had come to pass (Joshua 23:14). On the last day, the whole redeemed creation will say the same thing about every covenant God ever made.

Study Questions

1. Read Zechariah 12:10 to 13:1. What will happen when Israel looks on Him whom they pierced?
2. How does the return of Christ in Zechariah 14 and Acts 1:9-12 connect to the Mount of Olives?
3. List how each covenant is kept in the thousand-year kingdom. Which one are you most looking forward to seeing?
4. What are the three main views of the millennium? Why does the author hold the premillennial view?
5. Read Revelation 21:1-7. Where do you hear the covenant promise in these verses?
6. What does it mean to you that both the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles are named in the city of God?

Chapter 26: Questions People Ask About the Covenants

> *The hidden **things belong** to the LORD our God, and the revealed **things belong** to us and to our sons forever, to do all the words of this law.*
>
> Deuteronomy 29:29 (SLB)

Whenever I teach on the covenants, the same questions come up. Some are practical. Some are theological. A few are hard. Here are the ones I hear most often, with the best answers I can give from Scripture.

Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?

Christians who baptize infants often point to Colossians 2:11-12, where Paul links the circumcision of Christ with being buried with Him in baptism. They reason that since infant boys received the sign of the covenant with Abraham, the children of believers should receive the sign of the new covenant.

> *in whom also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the stripping off of the body of the sins of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in the baptism, in which also you were raised with **Him** through the faith of the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.* (Colossians 2:11-12)

Christians who baptize only believers notice that Paul describes a circumcision "made without hands," which is a work of the Spirit on the heart, and he connects baptism to being raised "through the faith." In the new covenant, every member knows the Lord, from the least to the greatest (Jeremiah 31:34). So the sign is given to those who have come to faith. Every baptism in the book of Acts follows someone hearing and believing the gospel (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 16:31-33; 18:8).

This is an honest difference among Bible-believing Christians, and it grows out of how they connect the covenants. Both sides agree that baptism does not save by itself, and that faith in Christ is what unites us to Him.

Are Christians Spiritual Jews?

In one sense, Paul says something close to it. A true Jew is one inwardly, with a circumcised heart (Romans 2:28-29), and all who belong to Christ are Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:29). Gentile believers share the faith and the spiritual blessings of Abraham.

But the New Testament never calls Gentile believers Israel or Jews in the national sense. Paul still speaks of Israel as his kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:3-4), and he warns Gentile believers not to boast over the natural branches (Romans 11:18). So I would say it this way: Gentile believers are children of Abraham by faith, grafted into Israel's covenant blessings, without becoming Israel.

Does Genesis 12:3 Mean Christians Must Support Israel?

God told Abram, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who disdains you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). Many Christians take this to mean that God still blesses nations and people who treat the Jewish people well, and judges those who mistreat them. I believe history gives a lot of evidence for that, and Scripture shows God judging nations for how they treated Israel (Joel 3:1-3; Zechariah 2:8; Obadiah 10-15).

That said, blessing the Jewish people is not the same as approving every decision of a modern government. The best blessing we can give anyone, Jew or Gentile, is the gospel of the Messiah who came from Israel. And we should stand against hatred of Jewish people anywhere we see it.

What About Ishmael?

God did not forget Ishmael. He heard Hagar's distress, named her son ("God hears"), and promised to make him a great nation.

> *And concerning Ishmael, I have heard you. Look, I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly, exceedingly; twelve princes he will father, and I will make him into a great nation.* (Genesis 17:20)

God kept that promise too. Ishmael had twelve sons who became princes of tribes (Genesis 25:12-16). But the covenant line ran through Isaac (Genesis 17:21). Many Arab peoples trace their heritage to Ishmael. The gospel is for them as much as for anyone. In fact, Isaiah pictures the flocks of Kedar and Nebaioth, Ishmael's first two sons, accepted on God's altar in the age to come (Isaiah 60:7; Genesis 25:13).

Were Old Testament Believers Part of the Church?

Old Testament believers were saved the same way we are: by grace through faith, looking forward to God's promise, while we look back on its fulfillment (Romans 4:1-8; Hebrews 11). They will be with us in God's kingdom forever (Matthew 8:11; Hebrews 11:39-40).

Dispensational teachers usually say the church as the body of Christ began at Pentecost, when the Spirit baptized believers into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 1:5; 11:15-16). Jesus spoke of the church as still future when He said "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18). So Old Testament believers are part of God's people, saved by the same Christ, but not part of the church in that technical sense. Covenant theologians see one church across both Testaments. Either way, Abraham and David will be in the kingdom, and they are our brothers.

Should Christians Keep Passover or the Sabbath?

Christians are free to, but not required to (Romans 14:5-6; Colossians 2:16-17). Many churches hold a Passover meal to show how it points to Christ, and that can be a wonderful teaching time. What we must never do is make any feast or day a condition of salvation or a measure of who is a better Christian. Chapter 20 explains why.

Is the New Covenant Only for Israel?

It was first promised to Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:31), and I believe God will keep it with the nation of Israel in the future (Romans 11:26-27). But Jesus poured out His blood "for many" (Matthew 26:28), and the apostles ministered the new covenant to Gentile churches (2 Corinthians 3:6). Gentile believers share fully in its spiritual blessings now: forgiveness, the Spirit, a new heart, and knowing God. There are not two new covenants. There is one, with Israel as its first heirs and the nations brought in through Christ.

If God's Covenants Are Unconditional, Does Obedience Matter?

Very much. God's unconditional covenants guarantee the final outcome, but they never made obedience optional. Generations of Israel lost the enjoyment of the land through sin, even though the promise stood. David's sons were disciplined, even though the throne stood. And in the new covenant, God's people are forgiven, but they are also given a new heart so that they will walk in His ways (Ezekiel 36:27). Grace does not cancel obedience. It produces it.

Can We Know When These Things Will Happen?

No. When the disciples asked Jesus whether He would restore the kingdom to Israel at that time, He said it was not for them to know times or seasons which the Father has set by His own authority (Acts 1:6-7). Anyone who sets dates is going beyond Scripture. What we do know is that God will keep every promise, and we are to be ready, faithful, and busy with His work until He comes (Acts 1:8).

What If I Am Still Not Sure?

That is all right. Moses said the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29). We will not understand everything. But we understand enough to trust Him and obey Him. Keep reading. Keep asking. Keep your Bible open. The God who made these covenants is not hiding from you.

Study Questions

1. Which of these questions have you wondered about before? Did the answer help?
2. Why do Christians differ on baptism and circumcision? What do both sides agree on?
3. How would you explain to a friend whether Christians are spiritual Jews?
4. What does Genesis 12:3 mean for how you treat Jewish people?
5. Read Acts 1:6-8. What did Jesus tell the disciples to focus on instead of dates?
6. What question do you still have about the covenants? Where could you look for an answer?

Chapter 27: Living as a Covenant People

> *Now may the God of peace, who brought up from **the** dead the great Shepherd of the sheep by **the** blood of **the** eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus, equip you in every good work to do His will, working in you what **is** well pleasing before Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom **be** the glory forever and ever. Amen.*
>
> Hebrews 13:20-21 (SLB)

We have covered a lot of ground in this book. Rainbows and altars, oaths and blood, kings and prophets, the upper room and the empty tomb, Israel and the church, and the city where God lives with His people forever. I want to close by bringing it home. What difference do the covenants make on a Tuesday morning, when you are tired, behind on bills, and not sure God is listening?

You Can Trust a God Who Keeps His Word

The first lesson of the covenants is simply this: God keeps His promises. He kept His promise to Noah for thousands of years. He kept His promise to Abraham across four centuries of slavery. He kept His promise to David through exile, through empty thrones, and through four hundred silent years, until a baby was born in David's town. He is keeping His promise to Israel even now, through every attempt in history to wipe them out.

If God keeps His word to them, He will keep it to you. When He says He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), He means it. When He says nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39), He means that too.

Your Standing Rests on Him

The second lesson is that your relationship with God does not rest on your performance. The covenant at Sinai depended on Israel, and Israel broke it. The new covenant depends on Christ, and He cannot fail. On the night God made His covenant with Abraham, Abram was asleep while God walked alone between the pieces. On the night Jesus was arrested, His disciples fell asleep while He prayed alone in the garden (Mark 14:37-41). Both covenants rest on God alone.

That does not make obedience unimportant. It makes obedience joyful instead of anxious. You do not obey to earn your place in the covenant. You obey because you are already in it, and because the Spirit has written God's law on your heart.

Remember at the Table

Jesus gave His church one meal to remember the new covenant: the bread and the cup. Every time you take Communion, you are standing where the disciples stood in the upper room. Take it seriously, but not fearfully. Look back at the cross. Look around at your brothers and sisters. Look forward to the day you will drink it new with Him in His Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

Keep Your Word

People who belong to a promise-keeping God should be promise-keeping people. The psalmist describes the one who may dwell on God's holy hill as someone who swears to his own hurt and does not change (Psalm 15:4). He keeps his word even when it costs him. Jesus said to let your yes be yes and your no be no (Matthew 5:37).

That applies to marriage, the most common covenant most of us will ever make. Malachi calls a man's wife "the wife of your covenant" and warns against dealing treacherously with her (Malachi 2:14). It applies to business deals, to commitments at church, and to the small promises we make our children. Every kept promise is a small picture of God's faithfulness.

Love the Jewish People

If the covenants are true, then Christians should love the Jewish people. We owe them our Bible, our Savior, and the very covenants we have been brought into (Romans 9:4-5; 15:27). We should pray for their salvation, as Paul did (Romans 10:1). We should stand against hatred of Jews wherever it shows up, including in churches. And we should share the gospel with them gently and honestly, the way Paul did, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16).

Watch and Be Ready

The covenants are not finished. Jesus is coming back. Every promise God made that has not yet been kept is a reason to look up. Paul told Titus that the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and to live soberly and righteously in this present age, as we look for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus (Titus 2:11-13). Watching for His return is not about charts. It is about how we live while we wait.

Have You Entered the New Covenant?

Everything in this book comes down to one question, and I would not be honest with you if I did not ask it. Have you entered the new covenant?

You do not enter it by being born into a Christian family, by being baptized, or by going to church, any more than an Israelite was right with God just because he was circumcised. You enter it the way Abraham did: by believing God. Not believing in God in a general way, but trusting Him to do what He has promised through His Son.

Here is what God promises. Every one of us has broken His law and earned death (Romans 3:23; 6:23). But Jesus, the Son of God, poured out His blood as the sacrifice of the new covenant, for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). He died, was buried, and rose again on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Him is forgiven, completely and forever. God writes His law on your heart, puts His Spirit in you, and becomes your God, and you become His child (John 1:12; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

> *that if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of **the** dead, you will be saved; for with **the** heart it is believed for righteousness, and with **the** mouth it is confessed for salvation.* (Romans 10:9-10)

If you have never put your trust in Jesus, you can do it right now. There are no magic words. God looks at the heart. But if it helps, you might pray something like this:

> *Lord Jesus, I have broken Your law and I cannot make it right. I believe You are the Son of God, that You shed Your blood for my sins, and that You rose from the dead. I turn from my sin and put my trust in You. Forgive me, make me new, and put Your Spirit in me. Thank You that You keep every promise. I am Yours. Amen.*

If you prayed that and meant it, tell someone. Find a church that teaches the Bible, be baptized, read God's Word, and take your place at the Lord's Table. You have entered a covenant that will never be broken, sealed by the blood of the One who swore by Himself.

A Last Word

I began this book by saying that God has never broken a promise. I want to end with the same thing, because it is the most important thing I know. Whatever you are facing, whatever you have done, whatever has been promised to you and broken by someone else, God is faithful. He keeps covenant. He swore by Himself, because there was no one greater. And He will keep His word to the very end.

> *Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus, equip you in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing before Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory to the ages of the ages. Amen.* (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Study Questions

1. Which covenant in this book has most strengthened your trust in God? Why?
2. How does knowing that the new covenant rests on Christ change the way you think about obedience?
3. What promise have you made, to God or to someone else, that you need to keep, even if it costs you?
4. How can you show love to Jewish people in your community?
5. Read Titus 2:11-14. How should waiting for Christ's return shape your life this week?
6. Have you entered the new covenant? If so, when? If not, what is holding you back?

Appendix A: The Covenants at a Glance

This chart gathers the main facts about each covenant in one place. The last column names the chapter where you can read about it.

Covenant	Key passages	Made with	Promises	Sign	Kind	Chapter
The first promise	Genesis 3:15; Romans 5:12-19	Adam and Eve, spoken to the serpent	A Seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head	None	Promise of grace	3
Noah	Genesis 6:18; 8:20 to 9:17	Noah, his seed, every living creature	No more worldwide flood; seasons continue; human life protected	The rainbow	Unconditional	4
Abraham	Genesis 12:1-3; 15; 17; 22:15-18	Abraham, then Isaac and Jacob	Land, a great nation, blessing for all families of the earth	Circumcision	Unconditional	5 to 7
Sinai (Mosaic)	Exodus 19 to 24; Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28	Israel at Mount Sinai	A treasured people; blessing for obedience, discipline for disobedience	The Sabbath	Conditional	8 to 10
Land	Deuteronomy 29 to 30	Israel on the plains of Moab	Scattering, then regathering and a circumcised heart	None named	Unconditional in its final promise	11
Priesthood (Phinehas)	Numbers 25:10-13; Malachi 2:4-5	Phinehas and his seed	A lasting priesthood; a covenant of peace	None named	Lasting grant	12
David	2 Samuel 7:8-16; Psalm 89; Jeremiah 33:17-26	David and his house	A son on the throne, a house and kingdom forever	None named	Unconditional	13
New	Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8 to 10	Israel and Judah, opened to all who believe	Forgiveness, the law on the heart, the Spirit, knowing God	The Lord's Supper	Unconditional	15 to 21

Appendix B: Words to Know

- **Abrahamic covenant.** God's covenant with Abraham, promising land, seed, and blessing (Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22).
- **Amillennialism.** The view that the thousand years of Revelation 20 describe the present age, with Christ reigning from heaven.
- **Berith.** The Hebrew word for covenant (say it beh-REETH).
- **Chesed.** The Hebrew word for steadfast love, loyal love bound by a promise (say it KHEH-sed).
- **Child-guardian.** The SLB's word in Galatians 3:24-25 for a household servant who watched over a child until he was grown; Paul's picture of the law.
- **Conditional covenant.** A covenant whose blessings depend on both sides keeping their part, like the covenant at Sinai.
- **Covenant.** A solemn, binding promise that sets up a relationship, sealed by an oath and often by a sign.
- **Covenant theology.** A framework that sees all of God's dealings after the fall as one covenant of grace, and the church as the continuation of Israel.
- **Cutting a covenant.** The Hebrew way of saying "making a covenant," from the practice of cutting animals in two and walking between the pieces.
- **Davidic covenant.** God's covenant with David, promising a son on his throne and a house and kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7).
- **Diatheke.** The Greek word for covenant, which can also mean a last will and testament (say it dee-ah-THAY-kay).
- **Dispensationalism.** A framework that reads the covenant promises to Israel in their plain sense, keeps Israel and the church distinct, and usually holds a pre-tribulation Rapture and a future thousand-year kingdom.
- **Gentile.** Anyone who is not Jewish.
- **Harpazo.** The Greek word for "caught away" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, from which we get the idea of the Rapture (say it har-PAD-zo).
- **Land covenant.** God's covenant in Deuteronomy 29 and 30 about Israel's scattering and regathering. Older teachers called it the Palestinian covenant.
- **Mediator.** A go-between who brings two parties together. Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Sinai; Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 9:15).
- **Millennium.** The thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation 20:1-6.
- **Mosaic covenant.** The covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai through Moses, also called the law or the old covenant.
- **Mystery.** In Paul's letters, a truth God kept hidden in earlier ages and has now revealed, such as Jews and Gentiles joined in one body (Ephesians 3:5-6).
- **New covenant.** The covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and made in the blood of Jesus, bringing forgiveness, a new heart, and the Spirit.
- **Noahic covenant.** God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures after the flood (Genesis 9).
- **Premillennialism.** The view that Christ returns before a literal thousand-year reign on earth.
- **Progressive covenantalism.** A framework that sees the covenants unfolding step by step toward Christ, usually with Christ as the true Israel.
- **Rapture.** The catching up of the church to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
- **Remnant.** The faithful few within Israel whom God has always kept for Himself (Romans 11:5).

- **Replacement theology.** The view that the church has replaced Israel in God's plan. Many who hold it prefer the term fulfillment theology.
- **Seventieth week.** The last seven years of Daniel's seventy sevens (Daniel 9:27), which I believe are the tribulation still to come.
- **Suzerain treaty.** An ancient treaty between a great king and a lesser king, with a form similar to parts of Deuteronomy.
- **Tribulation.** The future seven years of trouble on the earth before Christ returns in glory.
- **Unconditional covenant.** A covenant whose final fulfillment depends on God alone, like the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David, and the new covenant.

Appendix C: A Covenant Timeline

Dates before about 1000 B.C. are approximate, and Bible scholars hold more than one view on several of them. The early dates below follow the traditional reading of 1 Kings 6:1 and Exodus 12:40. The order matters more than the exact year.

When	Event	Passage
The beginning	Creation; the first promise after the fall	Genesis 1 to 3
Unknown	The flood; the covenant with Noah	Genesis 6 to 9
About 2090 B.C.	God calls Abram; the covenant cut between the pieces	Genesis 12; 15
About 2065 B.C.	Circumcision given; Isaac born; the oath on Mount Moriah	Genesis 17; 21; 22
About 1446 B.C.	The Exodus; the covenant at Sinai	Exodus 12 to 24
About 1406 B.C.	The land covenant on the plains of Moab	Deuteronomy 29 to 30
About 1000 B.C.	The covenant with David	2 Samuel 7
722 B.C.	The northern kingdom carried off by Assyria	2 Kings 17
About 622 B.C.	Josiah renews the covenant	2 Kings 22 to 23
586 B.C.	Jerusalem and the temple destroyed by Babylon; Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy given in these years	2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 31
538 B.C.	The first exiles return	Ezra 1
About A.D. 30 to 33	The Last Supper; the cross; the resurrection; Pentecost	Luke 22; Acts 2
A.D. 70	Rome destroys Jerusalem and the second temple	Luke 21:20-24
1948	The modern State of Israel declared on May 14	Ezekiel 36 to 37 (see Chapter 11)
Future	The Rapture of the church	1 Thessalonians 4:16-17
Future	The seventieth week; the time of distress for Jacob	Daniel 9:27; Jeremiah 30:7
Future	Israel looks on Him whom they pierced; Christ returns	Zechariah 12:10; 14:4
Future	The thousand-year reign of the Son of David	Revelation 20:4-6
Forever	The new heavens and new earth; God with His people	Revelation 21 to 22

Appendix D: Read the Covenants in 30 Days

If you want to read the covenant passages for yourself, this plan walks through them in thirty short readings. Read one a day, alone or with your group, and ask three questions each time: What does God promise? Who is it made with? How does Jesus answer it?

Day	Reading	Covenant
1	Genesis 1:26 to 2:17	Made to belong to God
2	Genesis 3	The first promise
3	Genesis 6:5-22; 8:20-22	Noah
4	Genesis 9:1-17	Noah and the rainbow
5	Genesis 12:1-9	Abraham called
6	Genesis 15	The night God walked alone
7	Genesis 17	The sign of circumcision
8	Genesis 22:1-19	The oath on Mount Moriah
9	Genesis 26:1-5; 28:10-22	Isaac and Jacob
10	Exodus 19	Sinai: rescue first
11	Exodus 24	The blood of the covenant
12	Exodus 32:1-14; 34:1-10	The golden calf and God’s name
13	Leviticus 23	The feasts
14	Leviticus 26	Blessings, curses, and God’s memory
15	Deuteronomy 29 to 30	The land covenant
16	2 Samuel 7	David
17	Psalm 89	David’s covenant in song
18	Jeremiah 31:31-40	The new covenant promised
19	Jeremiah 33:14-26	As sure as day and night
20	Ezekiel 36:22-38	A new heart and a new spirit
21	Ezekiel 37	Dry bones and one King
22	Luke 22:7-23	The cup of the new covenant
23	Galatians 3	The promise and the law
24	2 Corinthians 3	Ministers of a new covenant
25	Hebrews 8	A better covenant
26	Hebrews 9:11 to 10:25	Once for all
27	Ephesians 2:11 to 3:12	Gentiles brought near
28	Romans 9:1-5; 11	God has not rejected His people
29	Zechariah 12:10 to 14:9	Israel looks on Him; the King comes
30	Revelation 21:1 to 22:5	God with us forever

Appendix E: Notes for Group Leaders

This book works well for a small group or Sunday school class. Here are a few suggestions from the way the book is built.

- **Pace.** With 27 chapters, a group can take one chapter a week for about half a year, or two chapters a week for about three months. Parts One and Two pair well with the reading plan in Appendix D.
- **Read the Scripture aloud.** The covenant passages are the heart of each chapter. Have someone read the main passage before you discuss the questions.
- **Use the chart.** Appendix A gives the whole picture on one page. Come back to it often, so the group sees how each covenant builds on the last.
- **Handle disagreement gently.** Chapters 22 to 26 cover questions where Bible-believing Christians differ, like the role of Israel, the timing of the Rapture, and baptism. Let people say what they think. Keep the group pointed back to the text, and remind everyone how much we agree on.
- **Don’t skip the last chapter.** Chapter 27 asks whether each reader has entered the new covenant. Leave room for that conversation, and be ready to talk privately with anyone who wants to know more.

Appendix F: Sources and Credits

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). The following outside sources are named in this book.

- Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.5.2, translated by William Whiston (1737), public domain. Quoted in Chapter 21 and checked against the Project Gutenberg text.
- The Temple warning inscriptions from Herod's temple: one complete stone found in 1871, now in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums, and a partial stone found in 1935, now in Jerusalem. Described in Chapter 21 as background; not quoted.
- The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), chapter 7, and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689). Summarized in Chapters 3 and 23; not quoted.
- George E. Mendenhall's work on covenant forms in the 1950s, and Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003), on the Hittite treaty pattern. Summarized in Chapter 1 as background; not quoted.
- John Nelson Darby, the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), and the work of Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy on progressive dispensationalism. Named in Chapter 23; not quoted.
- Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012). Named in Chapter 23; not quoted.

Related books by the author, free at trinfinityenterprises.com: *The Lord's Table: A Complete Guide to Communion*, the *Daniel Bible Study*, and the *Revelation Bible Study*.

About This Book

He Swore by Himself walks through every major covenant in the Bible, from the first promise in the garden to the new covenant in the blood of Jesus, and shows how they hold the whole Bible together.

It covers God's covenant with Noah and the rainbow, the night God walked alone between the pieces for Abraham, the law given at Sinai and why God gave it, the land covenant, the promise of an eternal throne to David, and the new covenant promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Then it shows how Jesus keeps every one of them, what it means to live under the new covenant, and how Gentiles have been brought near.

The last part takes on the big questions. Has God finished with Israel? How do covenant theology, dispensationalism, and the newer views read the covenants? Why do the covenants matter for the Rapture and the end times? It lays out each view fairly, explains why the author holds a pre-tribulation view and believes God will keep His promises to Israel, and closes with what it all means for you.

Every chapter ends with study questions for personal reading or small groups. The back of the book has a chart of the covenants, a glossary, a timeline, a 30-day reading plan, notes for group leaders, a list of sources, and a Scripture index.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Scripture Index

This index lists every Bible passage that is named with its book somewhere in the text, with the pages where it appears.

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