

GOD'S COVENANT

THE STORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE BIBLE



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

God's Covenant

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God's Covenant

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Welcome to *God's Covenant*

The Bible is a single Book, from the mind of a single Author. It tells a single story, and it does so within the framework of a single, powerful structure.

That story and structure are God's covenant.

Many people are confused about the covenants of the Bible. They various covenants God entered with His people do not *replace* one another. They *build on* one another, unfolding toward the grand completion of the story and structure of Scripture in the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The better we understand God's covenant, and how it holds the story of Scripture together, the greater our access will be to the promises and power of God's Kingdom.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Covenants of Promise

... at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Ephesians 2.12

A fundamental mistake

In seeking to live a Christian worldview, nothing could be more important than basing everything in life on a clear understanding of the Bible, the Word of God.

But to understand the Bible we must read and study the Bible. All of it. Over and over again.

Many Christians find reading the entire Bible a challenge. Many parts of the Bible are clear, interesting, and immediately beneficial. Other parts, not so much. Many Christians – including, in my experience, many pastors – have yet to establish the discipline of reading regularly through the Bible, trying to gain from all the counsel of God everything they need to know, enjoy, and serve the Lord in this life, and to prepare for the life to come. And this helps to explain why the Christian worldview remains undeveloped and largely unused among the followers of Christ today.

Most Christians, I suspect, “hunt and peck” their way through Scripture. They follow a devotional guide of some sort, or just their own whims, or they let their reading of the Bible be determined by whatever subject is current in their Bible study group, or whatever their pastor is preaching.

But it is a fundamental mistake in our approach to the Bible not to treat it like a single book, with a single story line, that must be understood in its parts and as a whole if we are to gain the full benefit God intends. Unless we read and study the Bible in line with the intentions of Him Who inspired it, we’re going to miss some very important teachings.

The way to correct this problem is to make sure you have a good, overall grasp of the main idea of the Bible. Then you will be able to see how all the parts fit together, and you can learn how to let those parts which are clear shed light on those which are *less* clear, so that, increasingly, the whole picture of Christ and the redemption God has accomplished in Him emerges and engulfs you in all its glory.

The story of the Bible

Essentially, the Bible tells the story of God bringing glory to Himself by creating a people to know, love, and serve Him, according to His promises and commands. This is a story of grace and abundant life, even though, along the way in its telling, it also deals with sin and darkness and many things being not the way they’re supposed to be, as Neil Plantinga puts it (*Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*).

If the Bible were to be given a subtitle, I’d offer as an excellent candidate, “God’s Covenant of Promise.” Because this is what the Bible is all about. The Bible tells the story of God graciously binding Himself to a people of His own choosing, in order that through them, and the blessings He lavishes upon them, the knowledge of His glory might cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2.14).

In the Bible God enters a bond of peace with His covenant people, a bond that operates on three levels. By His gracious provision of redemption through Jesus Christ, God brings rebellious sinners to peace with Himself, cancelling their sins and giving them eternal life. He instills His peace and rest into their souls, taking away the fear of death and empowering them for an altogether new life. And then He enables all who know His peace to bring the peace of His rule into every aspect of their lives – all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. This is God’s covenant, and this is the story of the Bible.

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The structure of the Bible

But not only is God's covenant the *story* of the Bible; it also provides the Bible's *structure*. Paul mentions that many different covenants relate to the one overarching promise of God – the promise of redemption, forgiveness, life, and glory through our Lord Jesus Christ: the promise of peace. One covenant of promise overarches the entirety of Scripture. But that structure unfolds in several stages, as God enters His covenant at different periods of time, in different ways, to advance His covenant toward its consummation in Jesus Christ.

God's covenant begins in His grace. He gives human beings life in the world, life in all its blessings and bounty, then graciously improves on that by giving *eternal* life and peace to those who believe His promises. God's promises are precious and very great, and they all come to fulfillment in the one promise of eternal life through trusting in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins (2 Pet. 1.4; 2 Cor. 1.20).

All Scripture fits within and contributes to the unfolding covenant story and structure which holds the entire body of God's written revelation together. So if we want to understand God, His will and plan, and how we can make the most of our participation in that will and plan, we need to understand His covenant, both as the *story* of God's grace and the *structure* within which that story unfolds.

And this is what we'll do in this series on God's covenant of promise.

Reflect

1. How would you explain God's covenant? How does your understanding of God's covenant influence your reading of Scripture
2. Why is it important to read and study the Bible in its entirety?
3. God's covenant of promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In what ways?

Next steps – Conversation: What is a covenant? How does a covenant work? How much of our lives are involved in God's covenant, and what are the implications of that for what it means to be His covenant people? Talk with a Christian friend leader about these questions.

2 Adam and Eve

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Genesis 2.15-17

A bridge of many spans

It might be helpful, in trying to understand the Bible, to think of it as a bridge. It has a single roadway which leads from eternity past to eternity future, passing over the river of time. It is a bridge of one single arching span; its structure – like its roadway – extends from before the beginning of things to after the end of history. One perfect arch connects the distant past with the distant future, and suspends the road that passes over time.

That arch is God's covenant.

Two large sub-spans arch under the single span supporting the bridge of Scripture. We call these the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. They overlap a bit in that section of the New Testament which we call the gospels, and they share the same shape as the overarching span, God's one covenant with His people. They are separate spans, because they are intended to support the roadway at particular places as it passes over time, under the single arching span, toward the final destination for which the bridge has been constructed.

Within the two sub-spans, and under one single span are several smaller arches, each anchored at a point on the roadway and spanning toward another point somewhere further along the path. These arches are not separate spans; they are aspects of the structure of the one overarching span, and they support, depend on, and build toward one another, overlapping as they do.

These arches represent the various covenants of God, enacted at different times in Scripture as aspects of God's one overarching covenant.

We want to look a bit more closely at these covenants, so that we can understand their role in supporting the storyline and structure of Scripture.

In the beginning

God's covenant begins at the beginning of Scripture. From the get-go, we see God doing things that He will do over and over again in Scripture, each time with a little different application, but always reflecting the same basic elements, and always gesturing toward the same ultimate destination.

God's covenant began with Adam and Eve, whom He graciously created and established in an environment lush with bounty and bristling with promise. Having created our first parents entirely as an act of His grace, God then offered them a wonderful promise: Life! Life with Him, amid all His bounty, increasingly and ever more abundantly, presumably forever and ever. God's purpose in creating Adam and Eve was to bind them to Himself in perfect peace, so that they would know His glory and fill the earth with it.

But there was a catch. Adam and Eve had to *receive* the promise of God on *His* terms. And why would they not want to do that? After all, He had created them. He had filled their environment with good things. He had given them one another to enjoy, assist, and nurture. He had provided everything for them, and everything was very good (Gen. 1.31). So why would they not want what God was offering? Why would they want anything other than more of the life they were enjoying? All they needed to know was how to achieve that.

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And that was simple enough. To gain the promise of God, and thus to know fullness of life with Him, all Adam and Eve had to do was abstain from eating from a certain tree in the center of their garden. That's it. Two other mandates accompanied this one, of course: be fruitful and multiply, and exercise dominion over the earth. But our first parents' ability to fulfill these instructions would hinge on their willingness to obey the command not to eat from the tree in the center of the garden.

God graciously made and blessed our first parents. Then He held out the prospect of eternal life and increasing abundance with Him. All they had to do to demonstrate their understanding of and gratitude for His gracious work and offer, and to show their willingness to be enjoy life on His terms, was obey one very clear command.

The covenant violated

Well, we know what happened. Adam and Eve violated God's covenant, and, as a result, they forfeited (for the moment) the promise of His covenant, and came instead under its sanctions, concerning which they had been warned by God. He had told them that if they failed to uphold their end of His covenant, they would die. And die they did – spiritually, morally, relationally, culturally, socially, and, ultimately, physically.

This first arch under the sub-span of the Old Covenant follows the pattern all Scripture will take, and provides a footprint for other arches to follow. God's grace, followed by God's promises, offered according to God's commandments, bolstered by God's warnings and sanctions: this is the form every next stage of God's covenant will take, as the one overarching covenant of promise unfolds along the roadway of Scripture toward the goal of eternal life with God on the other side of time.

For reflection

1. How was God's grace evident in the covenant He made with Adam and Eve? Does His grace continue to operate like this? Explain.
2. Summarize the promise God offered Adam and Eve. Is this promise still valid? In what ways?
3. Adam's and Eve's disobedience introduced sin to the world, and changed the world drastically. But did sin change God? Or God's way of relating to His people? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Do you think God was being "reasonable" by withholding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from Adam and Eve? Does it matter whether we think God was being reasonable in this matter? Why or why not? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

3 Noah

So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"... Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you..." Genesis 9.1, 8

Restate and renew

The first formal mention of God's covenant comes in the story of Noah and the flood. In Genesis 6 God declared to Noah that He would establish His covenant with him (Gen. 6.18). We note that this covenant is not described as *a* covenant, as though it were one among several. This is *God's* covenant, and while God's manner of relating to human beings has not, to this point, been described in this way, it's clear from the wording God used with Noah, that the covenant He was making with him was the same one He had made with Adam and Eve.

The covenant with Adam and Eve, though it had been broken, remained in effect. Why? Hadn't our first parents forfeited their chance to glorify God and enjoy Him forever? Hadn't God warned them that they would die "in the day" they disobeyed Him? Indeed, and they did die, as we have seen.

But we remember that the *first principle* of God's covenant is grace, and the grace of God is able to cover a multitude of sins for those who shelter within it.

As God covered Adam and Eve with the skin of a sacrificed animal, so His grace covered their sins and allowed them to continue in His covenant throughout the course of their mortal lives. Thus, the covenant with Adam and Eve continued in principle – with its mandates, promises, and sanctions – up to the time of Noah.

With Noah, God's covenant renewed and restated His covenant. It's the same covenant – *God's* covenant – but we see that this sub-arch of the Old Covenant, while clearly in the same form as the previous sub-arch, contained facets unique to the situation of Noah's day.

Aspects of the covenant with Noah

We see in God's establishing His covenant with Noah certain similarities with the covenant as made with Adam and Eve, as well as certain differences. We note first, that God's covenant with Noah was all of *grace*. The whole world was corrupt before the eyes of God in the days of Noah – including, we must assume, Noah himself. Noah "found grace" in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6.8) – *found* grace, not *deserved* it. God revealed Himself and His will to Noah, just as He had done with Adam and Eve; and Noah submitted to Him, as God intended Adam and Eve should do.

God's covenant of promise is entered by grace through faith, looking to the promises of God, hoping in His favor, and walking in His law.

Second, as Adam and Eve had been given certain *commandments* to follow, so too with Noah. He was to build an ark for the deliverance of his family and the animals of the earth. In this instruction, we can see aspects of the mandates given to our first parents. A work was to be undertaken that would be the means for filling the earth with life. But Noah's ability to fulfill *that* mandate would depend on the more *proximate* task of building the ark. Would he obey and live? Or would he disobey and die with everyone else?

Following the flood, Noah built an altar and offered sacrifice to God, in a certain way, replicating God's act of covering Adam and Eve with the skin of a sacrificed animal. God restated His covenant with Noah, using

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much of the same language He had used with Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply” and “fill the earth” (Gen. 9.1). We note also that God *blessed* Noah and his family, as He had blessed Adam and Eve. The sense of this word is that God established them in a right relationship with Himself. From that relationship, established and sustained by God’s grace and Word, all other blessings and bounty would flow.

Finally, we note that, as God had given Adam and Eve a sign to indicate His favor – the skin clothing from a sacrificed animal – so God gave to Noah and his descendants a *sign* of His grace. The rainbow appearing in the sky served to allay the fears of men that a flood was coming again, and reminded them of God’s grace and promise for all time. It was a sign from God to help men remember His grace and promise of peace.

God's continuing covenant

The essence of God’s covenant with Noah was thus the same as with Adam and Eve – the promise of life with God in peace and plenty. We remember that the earth in Noah’s day was corrupt and sinful, filled with lust and violence – so much so that God regretted ever having made human beings in the first place. Thus it is a measure of the steadfastness of God’s grace and the unchangeableness of His purpose that He determined to give humankind a new beginning, rather than to destroy them altogether.

God’s covenant derives from God’s being. He is all grace, all steadfast love and faithfulness. He does not change, and His purposes will not fail. And He is a God of infinite understanding and patience, as we see in His being willing to adapt the terms and administration of His covenant with sinful human beings, to suit the needs and conditions of the time.

For reflection

1. How can you see the grace of God at work in His covenant with Noah?
2. How many similarities can you identify between the covenant as God entered it with Noah and as He entered it with Adam and Eve?
3. In what ways did changes in the historical and cultural setting affect the specific details of the *administration* of God’s covenant during the time of Noah?

Next steps - Transformation: What are you learning about God’s covenant and what it may offer and require of you? What “sign” does God give you, to keep you mindful of His grace and promise of life and peace?

4 Abraham

Now the LORD had said to Abram:

“Get out of your country,

From your family

And from your father's house,

To a land that I will show you.

I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you

And make your name great;

And you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

And I will curse him who curses you;

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12.1-3

A continuing covenant

God's covenant with Noah, being simply an extension of His covenant with Adam and Eve, continued to support the “roadway” of divine revelation unto the days of Abraham. With Abraham, God's covenant begins to take a more definite shape, based on a set of promises God made to the patriarch concerning His intentions for His people.

The promises of God to Abraham are precious and very great – so great and precious that they prompted this man to leave his prosperous and familiar way of life to go to a distant and unfamiliar place, there to wait on the Lord to fulfill His Word.

God established His covenant with Abraham, as He declared in Genesis 17.2, and we can see that this is the same covenant as has existed from the very beginning. It is inaugurated by an act of God's *grace* – calling a man out of wealth and idolatry by holding out to him the promise of life and peace. It requires certain actions of *obedience* on Abraham's part, which were to demonstrate his faith and trust in God. The first *promise* of God to Abraham is the promise of blessing, just as He had blessed Adam and Eve and Noah. The first *act* of Abraham in reminding himself of God's grace and promise was to build an altar and sacrifice unto the Lord.

All this looks very familiar because all Abraham was doing was situating himself squarely within the covenant God was entering with him, the same covenant He had entered with Adam and Eve and Noah, only, once again, adjusted for changes in the historical and cultural situation.

The six-fold promise of blessing

God made six specific promises to Abraham (Abram), although we should probably see that all these promises are simply temporal manifestations of the one overarching promise of life and peace with God.

God said He would make Abraham *a great nation* – many people, extending through many generations. He promised to *bless* them and thus establish them in a right relationship with Himself. God intended to give this people *a great name*, that is, to make them influential in the earth, and thus a people who would exercise dominion in certain important ways. He promised to *make them a blessing* to other people, a channel through which others would come to know the covenant privileges of God, and to *protect and provide* for them at all times. Finally, God pointed Abraham down the long roadway of time, and promised to *bless all families of the earth*, both those of the present and those to come, through the relationship He is entering with the patriarch.

These precious and very great promises became a cornerstone for Israel's experience throughout the period of the Old Covenant. Even into the New Testament, we find the Jews clinging to their descent from

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Abraham as the defining element of their national identity and hopes. God was promising life and peace to Abraham, as He had done with Adam and Eve and Noah, but He was doing so in terms that were more compelling and more far-reaching than what either of Abraham's forebears might have imagined. God was again adjusting His unchanging covenant to suit the demands of the roadway from Abraham forward.

Signs for the present and the future

As in previous manifestations of His covenant, God gave Abraham a *sign* to remind him of the grace and promise of the Lord. Actually, God gave Abraham two signs – one an immediate and temporal reminder of His grace, and one designed to secure the blessings of God for all time.

The sign of *circumcision* indicated the cutting away of everything that kept God's people from being fruitful in the blessings of God (Gen. 17). Circumcision is accomplished through the shedding of blood, and it was given to serve as a permanent identifying mark for those who bore it, reminding them constantly that they had been set apart by God within a framework of promises, mandates, and sanctions, within which they were privileged to know the presence and peace of the Lord Himself.

The second sign of God's covenant with Abraham was actually given first. We read about it in Genesis 15. Here God *passed between the pieces of sacrificed animals* to signal that He alone bears the authority and responsibility for fulfilling His covenant of promise. God cannot die, like those animals slain to create that covenant pathway; therefore, God's covenant cannot fail.

But Abraham can – and would – fail in His covenant obligations, as we all do even to this day. Thus God obligated Himself, to ensure that His covenant of promise would always be a covenant of grace, to bear His own wrath against all covenant-breakers and to endure the punishment they and we deserve. Only thus, by God fulfilling His covenant in all aspects, would it remain a covenant of grace and promise.

And only thus, within a covenant of grace and promise, would we know true life and unfailing peace with God.

For reflection

1. How can you see that God's covenant with Abraham carries forward the covenant He made with Adam and Eve and Noah?
2. What is the role of promises in God's relationship with people?
3. What is the role of obedience in receiving and enjoying the promises of God?

Next steps – Conversation: Meditate on the promises made to Abraham. Read Romans 4.13-18. How should the promises to Abraham guide us in God's covenant today? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

5 Moses

Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them. Exodus 2.23-25

God and His people

At Mt. Sinai God formalized His covenant relationship with His people in the simplest of terms: “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19.5, 6).

Let's note a few significant covenantal aspects of this declaration. First, it comes *after* God had already delivered His people from captivity in Egypt. That is, it *follows* His act of *grace* in saving them unto Himself. They were already His people, by an act of His sovereign grace; now He was simply setting forth His expectations for them *as* His people – as He had done with Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abram.

Second, God referred to His covenant people as a Kingdom, thus reaching back to a statement from the period of the Abrahamic covenant in which God promised to give a king to His people, and to make them a Kingdom over all the nations of the earth (Gen. 49.8-11). This particular terminology, as we shall see, becomes a sub-arch linking Jacob, Israel, and David with the coming Kingdom of God.

Third, as our text indicates, this act of entering into covenant with Israel represented a *continuation* of God's covenant with Abraham, which God “remembered”, that is, attended diligently unto, when He sent Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. And, by continuing the covenant with Abraham into this new stage of covenant unfolding, God was also continuing the covenant with Adam and Eve and with Noah – *His* covenant, that is, a covenant of grace and of the promise of peace.

This simplified statement of God's covenant would be reduced to a formula, “I will be your God, and You will be my people,” that would be repeated and invoked over and over in the Old Testament as well as the New. The formula itself becomes a kind of sub-arch binding both the Old and New Testaments together under the one overarching covenant of promise, which provides the story and structure of the entire Bible.

Preparing for the land of promise

At Mt. Sinai God prepared His people to enter the land promised to Abraham. That land would come to *symbolize* all the promises of God's covenant, as well as all the hopes of God's people to know Him and enjoy His favor forever. The land would also come to *represent* the whole earth – all of which God owns – as we see in the New Testament, so that the idea of the land/earth, beginning with Adam and extending through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus becomes yet another sub-arch in the story and structure of divine revelation.

But now the people God was bringing into His covenant were not just a man and his wife, like Adam and Eve, or a man and his household, like Noah and his sons, or even a man and his immediate descendants, like Abraham and the sons of Jacob, his grandson. Now Israel had become a great nation, and for a great nation to realize the promise of God's blessing, provision, protection, and greatness and blessing to the world, they would need to have God's covenant restated in terms more in line with their needs.

The Law and the covenant

This is why God gave His Law to Israel at Mt. Sinai.

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We have already seen that, in the context of God's covenant, *commandments* are essential to gaining the *promises* of God. Adam and Eve, created by grace and blessed by grace, were given commandments so that they might know the fullness of life with God. Keeping the commandments did not *earn* them a place in the presence and favor of God; keeping the commandments gave them fuller, richer *access* to the life God had given them with Him.

The same was true of Noah and Abraham. Each was given commandments – laws from God, if you will – but not as a way of gaining favor with God. Rather, the commandments came to them as men chosen by the grace of God, so that they could become more fully immersed in the life of God, the life of His presence and peace.

The same is true with Israel at the time of Moses. God did not give them the Law so that, by keeping it, they would somehow merit the grace of the Lord. His covenant with Israel began in grace, and then turned to commandments as a way of illuminating the roadway, so to speak, by which, over time, they would enjoy more of the blessings of the Lord. The Law, God insisted, was given to bring Israel more fully into the life of God's covenant blessings (Lev. 18.1-5; Deut. 28.1-14).

The Law illuminates more brilliantly the roadway of redemption and restoration. And, as we shall see, that Law becomes a permanent fixture for God's chosen people, as they cross the river of time toward the eternal presence and peace of God.

For reflection

1. In what ways is the Law given on Mt. Sinai similar to the commandments given to Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham?
2. Keeping the Law was not for *earning* salvation, but for *proving* and *improving* the salvation freely received. Explain.
3. How can you see that God's covenant with Moses only continues and expands His covenant with Abraham, Noah, and Adam and Eve?

Next steps – Preparation: What role should the Law of God have in our covenant relationship with Him? Meditate on Romans 3.31, Romans 7.12, and 1 John 2.1-6? How will you bring more of God's Law into your walk with and work for Him?

6 David

“Also the LORD tells you that He will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” 2 Samuel 7.11-13

The promise of a kingdom

The sub-arch of the covenant at Mt. Sinai brings forward the essential components of the covenants with Adam, Noah, and Abraham, and extends for the rest of the Old Testament. But it is bolstered and supported by an additional sub-arch, that of the covenant God made with David.

The footings of that sub-arch were laid in the covenants with Abraham and with Israel at Mt. Sinai. In Genesis 49.8-11, on the roadway of redemption under the sub-arch of the Abrahamic covenant, God promised to provide a king for His people Israel from the tribe of Judah. Kings would descend from Judah and rule over Israel until *Shiloh* appeared. This word is a contraction in the Hebrew language, meaning something like, “He Whose it is.” A King would come, Jacob prophesied, Who would be He-for-Whom-the-Kingdom-of-Israel was being prepared. At that time, the dynasty of kings descending from Judah would cease, and Shiloh would remain King forever.

Under the covenant made with Israel at Mt. Sinai, Israel was promised a king, but with the proviso that this king must rule under and according to the Law of God (Deut. 17). The king Israel would choose must submit to the Law and fulfill it if Israel was to realize her full promise as God’s covenant people.

A kingdom was promised to Israel under the covenant with Abraham. The character of that kingdom was outlined under the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. And under David, yet more specifics of that kingdom would be revealed.

David's kingdom and the Kingdom to come

At the time David became king over Israel, God was already preparing a way for His people across the remainder of time’s river, unto the bank of eternal blessing in His presence and peace. And that journey involved a King, descended from David, Who would reign over the Kingdom of God forever.

Surely, this King would be none other than the promised Shiloh, to Whom all the nations would declare their allegiance?

From the time of David onward the focus on a coming King and Kingdom begins to accelerate. Prophets like Isaiah and Daniel foretold the coming of a Kingdom that would be characterized by the righteousness of God’s Law, that would grow and increase and fill the entire earth, and that would overcome and supplant all other kingdoms and nations.

A King was promised to rule over this Kingdom. He would be lowly, and serve His people like a shepherd, and He Himself would be the promised peace for God’s chosen people (Mic. 5.2-5). This King would give His Kingdom to those who believe in Him, and they would inherit the nations of the world as a result (Ps. 111.6-9; Dan. 7.18-27). His Kingdom would rule the entire earth, offering to the nations of the world the opportunity of living in the promise and peace of the Lord (Ps. 2), while, at the same time, suppressing and overwhelming any who opposed this advancing rule (Ps. 110.1).

This King would be exalted to the right hand of God, where He would rule in righteousness, peace, and joy a people of His own possession (Pss. 45, 47, 93, 110).

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From David onwards, the covenant of God, which had been an ever-widening roadway from Adam and Noah, through Moses and Israel, was being mapped out for greater breadth still, taking in all the nations and peoples of the earth.

So, where is this King?

The disasters of first, Israel's, then Judah's destruction and captivity were intended by God to send a message about the nature of the promised Kingdom that would bring in all the blessings of His covenant. No merely temporal realm would suffice. Men would always be sinners. They would always rebel against God, preferring their own gods to Him and flaunting their own power rather than resting in the power of the Lord.

The result of all earthly kingdoms, even those where devotion to God was at least superficially practiced, would be rebellion, judgment, and collapse. No human efforts can secure the blessings of God's covenant. Only God can provide these, and He chose to do so, not in an earthly kingdom or through merely human rulers, but in a Kingdom not of this world, ruled by an eternal King Whose goings-forth were from all eternity past and would continue through all eternity to come. This is why God left His people without a king when they returned from captivity in Babylon, but continued to point forward to a day when His Kingdom would once again prevail over the earth.

God's King and His Kingdom are the great covenantal bridge, spanning time from before the beginning to after the end. When that Kingdom finally came to earth, to provide the roadway of redemption along the arch-spans of God's covenant, it was not "begun" by the One Who proclaimed it. Rather, it was "brought near," as He Himself insisted over and over. The Kingdom had always existed, held in the mind of our Creator and Redeemer, and in abeyance historically, until Shiloh, the eternal Son of David, should come to introduce it into the everyday realities of human history.

For reflection

1. What is your understanding of the Kingdom of God? Where is it? How does one enter it?
2. Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom was "near" or "at hand" or even "within you." Meditate on John 20:21. For what reason has God sent us into the world?
3. Meditate on Romans 14:17, 18 and Matthew 6:33. How do you work out these two passages in your daily life?

Next steps – Conversation: What is the Kingdom of God? How does it relate to the promises of God and His covenant? What is your place in the Kingdom of God (1 Thess. 2:12)? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

7 New Covenant

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” Jeremiah 31.31-34

Covenant and Kingdom

In the New Testament, the covenant God had entered with His people, and the Kingdom He had promised from the days of Jacob onwards, come together in a single Person – our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus represents the fulfillment of all the precious and very great promises of God (2 Pet. 1.4; 2 Cor. 1.20). He is the King of Israel and the Lord of all lords. His Kingdom has come with power (Acts 1.8; 1 Cor. 4.20), power which is reconciling all things back to God (2 Cor. 5.17-21) and making all things new (Rev. 21.5).

To know Jesus Christ – to receive, embrace, trust, follow, and enjoy Him – is to know the full blessings of God’s covenant and the full power of His eternal Kingdom. In Jesus, God invites the world into His covenant and Kingdom, to know His glory and to bask in the fullness of His peace forever.

Jesus is both the roadway of God’s covenant and the beginning and end of the story and structure of redemption. He is our Bridge over time into the fullness of God and His peace. Only in Jesus can we know the promise of God’s covenant, the power of His Kingdom, and the peace of His presence forever.

Why is this so?

Jesus and God’s covenant

First, because Jesus is both God and man. He bridges the unseen and seen worlds, making a way for us to live fully and abundantly in both, through His life, death, and resurrection. Reaching down to us from the eternal, unseen realm of glory, Jesus lifts us up, in His resurrection and ascension, so that we are seated with Him in the eternal presence and peace of God (Eph. 2.6).

Second, because Jesus fulfilled all requirements of God’s covenant and Kingdom. God’s covenant, we recall, requires obedience to His commandments; His Kingdom is a Kingdom of righteousness. Jesus has passed through the covenant pathway of the Lord as a burning torch and a smoldering oven (Gen. 15), refined and refining everything and everyone He touches, perfectly fulfilling all the righteous requirements of God’s Law.

But He also took upon Him the burden of our disobedience, enduring slaughter, like a sacrificial Lamb, to ensure that we who continually stray from God’s covenant path might always be renewed in Him Who is the Way (Jn. 14.6).

As King and Lord of God’s covenant, Jesus has overcome every enemy of our souls, and He is destroying the works of everyone and everything that opposes the progress of His rule. His covenant people may suffer setbacks and sorrows along the path over time, but they will always make progress so long as they set their eyes on Him, waiting for them on the far bank (Col. 3.1-3; Heb. 11.13-16). He has pioneered the way into the fullness of God’s presence and peace (Heb. 12.1, 2), and He rules the world, with truth and grace, making even the nations to show the glories of His righteousness.

God's Covenant

So, look for Jesus!

Jesus is the *story* of Scripture. Jesus is the *structure* Who sustains the Bible and carries it through to its glorious conclusion in Revelation 21 and 22. Wherever you're reading in the Bible, therefore, look for Jesus (Jn. 5.39). Look for Him in the examples of great saints, the types and symbols of God's covenant, the pre-incarnate manifestations of His Word, every doctrine of faith and life, and all the means of redemption and renewal in the Lord. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega of Scripture and all things. In Him all things consist and are held together (Col. 1.17; Heb. 1.3). He is advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and one day He will deliver us and it to our Father and His, to the praise of His glorious grace!

God's covenant takes many developing forms throughout the Bible. Nevertheless, all these various covenants are but unfolding expressions of the one covenant of promise, and the promise of that covenant, the promise of life and peace forever with God, is always, at every place in Scripture, held out to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things; to Him be the glory forever and ever!

For reflection

1. How can you see that Jesus features in all the various covenants of Scripture?
2. The various covenants of Scripture are like the sections of a telescope, which is the one covenant of God. Explain.
3. Why is it important to seek Jesus in all parts of Scripture?

Next steps – Transformation: How can you learn to “see Jesus” more consistently throughout the Bible? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question.

God's Covenant

For reflection or discussion

1. What is a “covenant”? What are the essential components of *God's* covenant?
2. How can you see that all the various covenants of Scripture share in the essential components of God's covenant?
3. We say that God's covenant *unfolds* in Scripture, and is sensitive to the times and circumstances of the people of God. Explain.
4. Why is it important to keep Jesus as the focal point of God's covenant at all stages of its unfolding?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about God's covenant from this study? How are you implementing that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.