



'Adam's broken covenant – weeds come freely, flowers are hard work'



1: Creation and Deluge

In a new series for PT, **Jon Garvey** reveals how God's Covenants are the key to understanding God's Word and His ways – and each one is all about Jesus!

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Everybody knows that the Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments, or Covenants. This division is Scripturalⁱ, representing the superiority of the Gospel of Jesus over the Law of Moses. But there are more than two important covenants in the Bible; seven in fact. Actually God's entire dealings with mankind are through covenants, so the more we understand them, the more we understand how God works. Understanding God's Covenants is a major key to interpreting the Bible properly. In this series I will try to unpack key truths about each Covenant – and how Jesus is at the heart of them all!

People discovered early on the need for solemn obligations in order to maintain society. How can I protect my marriage? How can I and my neighbour protect our boundaries? How can I distribute my property after I die? The agreements resulting from these needs are *covenants*.

Covenants can be mutual, like marriage, or unilateral, like a will. Or they may be imposed by a stronger party, like a peace treaty. The Old Covenant of Sinai itself takes the same form as contemporary treaty covenantsⁱⁱ, showing that God will employ the most solemn human framework available to express his own commitments.

Human covenants involve promises, oaths, conditions and penalties. They employ a mediator. They often invoke divine sanction through sacrifice. The same is true of God's covenants.

The Seven Covenants of God

God was aware of solemn obligation long before mankind, because from eternity Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwelt together in mutual love, harmony and faith-

fulness. We shall see that there is covenant relationship within the Trinity. So it is not surprising that the Triune God's dealings with the race He created in His image should also be based on covenant.

All the names commonly used for the covenants are open to misinterpretation. So I will identify them purely by the mediator involved. On this basis, the seven covenants are as follows:

- 1 The Covenant with Adam
- 2 The Covenant with Noah
- 3 The Covenant with Abraham
- 4 The Covenant with Moses
- 5 The Covenant with David
- 6 The Covenant with Jesus
- 7 The eternal Covenant of the Father with the Son

The last actually unites all the others, showing that they ultimately serve God's one eternal purpose. We must dismiss any idea of God trying out different plans to put the world straight, or our study will merely be a nitpicking exercise of apportioning the Bible to different dispensations, mostly irrelevant to us. **But once we see that they're all about Jesus, and that they all apply to us, then the whole Bible comes alive.**

The first Covenant – with Adam

The creation account doesn't seem to mention a covenant. But in Hosea, speaking of Israel, the Lord complains: "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there."ⁱⁱⁱ

What solemn obligations did God make at our creation? That's simple: He gave us blessing, great numbers, and the whole world!^{iv} That's pretty comprehensive. This

Covenant: a solemn obligation taken by one person with respect to somebody else



Covenant, unlike all the others, is not based on a promise – it is delivered immediately! God does not say He *will* bless humanity – He blesses them *now*, walking and talking with them in Eden^v. And why not, for there was no sin to deal with.

Its openness is notable. Effectively God says, “Do what you like”. It’s easy to understand why. This is a Covenant for people whose nature was, by creation, good^{vi}. They would naturally only do what God himself would want. In Eden the service of God truly was perfect freedom.

Nevertheless, there was one condition. There are two creation accounts in Genesis, with different purposes. Chapter 1 covers the principles of creation; chapter 2 the human perspective. So 2.15-17 actually parallel 1.28-30. In chapter 1 the Covenant covers the whole race. Male and female are given all seed-bearing plants to eat. In chapter 2, this is repeated, but a proviso is made about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is forbidden on pain of death. For us a prohibition is a green light to sin^{vii}, but for sinless man this was no temptation. When the serpent tries to stir up Eve’s resentment by suggesting God has forbidden any tree, she innocently corrects him – only one tree is forbidden, so there is no problem^{viii}.

Thus mankind was given freedom to obey God, but also the possibility of disobedience. These two were unequal – free will was freedom to be good, whilst the possibility for sin was actually alien to man’s nature. It was the equivalent of falling off a bicycle on a straight road – possible, but perverse.

So the penalty of death was not harsh, but fitting for the deliberate slighting of the Creator who gave us the whole world. Moreover, **death is as much a description as a penalty: to live outside God’s will is to be estranged from God. God is life, so estrangement from him is, by definition, death.**

The other key point of this Covenant is its mediator. **It was not made with every human, but with Adam for every human.** Eve was made after the Covenant was given to Adam, yet shared his blessing, his rule, his world – and his penalty for disobedience. In the same way, though Eve succumbs to the serpent first it is Adam whom God calls to account^{ix}, who brings a curse on the world^x, and who is described as banished from Eden^{xi}. Indeed, the whole Bible (like our Hosea passage) remem-

bers the sin of Adam rather than that of Eve. The ground is cursed for the whole race through Adam^{xii}, and as Paul points out^{xiii} death and sin came to all men through Adam’s one transgression.

We must understand this to see how Israelites were bound by a covenant made with Moses, or how we can be saved through the covenant obedience of Jesus. The theological term sounds like the EU – *federal headship*. Adam, founder of our race, was counted by God as its representative. His descendants would inherit the Covenant blessings – but by the same token they inherited the penalty, both death and the curse of sin itself.

We may find that unfair, but the proof is in the event – everyone since Adam has sinned, and everyone since Adam has died, even the most innocent infant. We’ve all struggled in a world cursed through Adam’s sin. It’s not so strange – nations pay reparation for the wrongs of previous generations. Individuals inherit the genes of character weaknesses from their ancestors. We too have inherited Adam’s penalty, which affected him spiritually, genetically, socially and ecologically.

Man broke the Covenant, then. God’s response was threefold: justice, forbearance and grace. In justice, God cursed the ground and banished the race. Yet He forbore to destroy us, tolerating increasing sin until Noah’s time. In grace He clothed Adam and Eve in skins – the first bloodshed, foreshadowing atonement by blood^{xiv}; He promised salvation through the death of Christ^{xv}; He accepted Abel’s sacrifice and gave saving faith to Seth’s line^{xvi}.

But in the end God did enforce the penalty. The Flood is simply the outworking of a Covenant that, because of our sin, failed. The Covenant that first gave life finally caused utter destruction to the race.

To make a new start history would need a new Covenant, designed for the fallen, rather than the innocent – and that’s the subject of the next article.

i Galatians 4.24-26
ii Walton, John H, Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context (Grand Rapids, 1989) ch.4.
iii Hosea 6.7
iv Genesis 1.28-30
v Genesis 3.8
vi Genesis 1.31
vii Romans 7.7-12

viii Genesis 3.1-3
ix Genesis 3.9-11
x Genesis 3.17-19
xi Genesis 3.21-24
xii Genesis 3.17-19
xiii Romans 5.15-19
xiv Genesis 3.21
xv Genesis 3.15
xvi Genesis 5

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