

Date : 19 February 2023
Theme : The God we can trust
Topic : Relating with our Covenant-keeping God
Key passage : *Genesis 9:8-15*
Key verse : *I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you..... Genesis 9:9*

Introduction

Covenants are the backbone of the biblical narrative because our God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. If one understands how covenants function in the bible, one will have a good grasp of how the bible fits together. God has made several covenants in the bible and they play a fundamental role in helping us see the big picture. We can learn a lot about God and His covenant-keeping from His covenants made with Adam, Noah and Abraham.

Today we will consider how God establishes a covenant relationship with His people and how we as covenant keepers will benefit from walking with God.

a) What is the purpose of covenant making and keeping?

- It is to inform us how God relates to us. From the creation of man, God want us to know how keen He is to establish this relationship with man.

b) How does God establish a covenant relationship with the first man, Adam?

In this relationship, God defines the terms, namely,

- What are His blessings and obligations?
- What are man's obligations?
- Consequences for keeping or breaking the covenant.

c) Who are the parties involved?

- Two parties who are of unequal weightage, God and man. God, on the one hand, is Almighty and All-wise. He starts the initiation in which He promises and offers blessings and protection to man, the weaker party. The latter, as man, pledges to render worship and obedience. It is a covenantal relationship between Creator and created, Lord and servant, King and subject.
- The benefits are obviously on man's side.

Why would God, a Superior being, wish to enter into a covenantal relationship with us?

When God speaks of His covenantal relationship with His people throughout the bible, the language is often that of marriage. God's people are like a bride whom He loves and is devoted to. God desires that His people respond to His loving devotion with fidelity.

Why can't God's people also worship other gods and participate in other religious practices?

In the same way that a devoted husband does not want his wife to be in intimate relations with other men, so too, God sees such behaviour as spiritual adultery. Love by definition is exclusive and that is how we are to be devoted to God alone.

d) What are the terms of covenantal relationships?

- God obligates Himself to love us as His special people (above all people)
- To bless us, spelling out what His blessings are *Deuteronomy 28*
- He states His instructions clearly so that His expectations are unmistakable.

- God's people are to honour and obey His commands
- Submit to His authority
- Worship Him alone and to have no other gods.

There are consequences for keeping the covenant (His promised blessings) and for covenant breaking (His favour withdrawn, curses instead of blessings).

1. Examples of entering into covenantal relationship with God.

a) Adam and Eve

- God created humans in His image to partner with Him in filling the earth with more people who would share His image and rule over His creation. While the word *covenant* (*berit*, Hebrew) is not explicitly used in *Genesis 1*, the details of the relationship are similar to later covenants in the text.
Adam and Eve were to be His regents (governing as God's representative); representing His practical rule on earth. In the garden of Eden, God blessed them and laid out His terms of their relationship. *Hosea 6:7* gives the verdict *...But like Adam, they transgressed the covenant...*
- He commanded them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it would bring the curse of death on humanity.
- In this first test of covenantal faithfulness, they failed. The consequence of their disobedience (=covenant breaking, when they betrayed loyalty to God by following the devil) was to be cast out of the Garden and to be spiritually separated from God. The divine-human relationship was fractured, plunging mankind into corruption and death:
 - Adam and Eve exiled from Eden *Genesis 3*
 - Cain sided with Satan, killing his brother *Genesis 4*
 - Lamech bragged about his murderous ways *Genesis 4*
 - The refrain *...and he died...* repeated 8 times, revealed how death reigned over humanity. *Genesis 5*
 - Sin drove the whole world into chaos. *Genesis 6:1-8*

b) God entered into a covenantal relationship with Noah *Genesis 6:9 – Genesis 9*

- God commanded Noah to build an ark for his family; God would bring animals to Noah.
- God promised to deliver Noah from the flood with this ark, which Noah built, obeying all of God's commands.
- God covenanted with Noah with a sign of the rainbow
 - After Noah, sin re-surfaced to ruin the world *Genesis 9-11*
 - God continued to repair the broken relationship with humans by calling Abraham.

c) God called Abraham into covenantal relationship.

- God promised Abraham a huge family which would inherit Canaan and bring universal blessing to all humanity.
...I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing... Genesis 12:2
- God commanded Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees and to follow God wherever He would lead. Circumcision was a sign of this Abrahamic covenant.
- God cuts a covenant with Abraham through a covenant ritual. Abraham was to split a ram, a goat and a heifer and two birds in halves. God's fire passed between the pieces.
(Abraham as covenant keeper, obeyed God's commands and enjoyed the distinction of being Jesus' ancestor).

2. Today, how do we enter into covenantal relationship with God?

a) Today we enter into covenant with God through faith in the finished work of Christ.

What do you say to God to enter into a covenant with Him?

...Father God, I recognise that I am a sinner and deserve to die. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross in my place. Today, I receive Jesus' death as Substitute for my sin.

I believe Jesus Christ, Your Son, died for me and rose again. I receive Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

- What happens when you acknowledge Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?
You have starting out faith in Christ when, by faith, you received the gospel message. God, by imputing Jesus' righteousness on you or anyone who has faith in His Son, enters into a covenantal relationship with you.

- How do you progress in your walk with God in this covenantal relationship?
 - Going out faith.
Think of the Israelites' going out faith They left Egypt (picture of sin) after celebrating the Passover Feast (foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ).
 - Going on faith
The children of Israeli continued on their journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land with fellow travellers. This is an ongoing, continuing faith reflected by covenant-keeping.

b) What is the sign of our covenantal relationship with God?

Signs are physical indicators of sealing a covenant.

- Today our Lord Jesus leaves us with two signs of the New Covenant – Baptism and partaking of the Holy Communion (Lord's Supper). The solemn vow which we have made to God in Baptism (to die to sin and to rise in new life in Christ) is renewed every time we partake of the Lord's Supper.
 - What if I believe but not baptised?
Baptism is a sign of separation from slavery to sin (leaving Egypt =slavery) and crossing of Red Sea signify entering into allegiance to Jesus. Without baptism, it is a sign of not having left Egypt at all. This separation is leaving Egypt's old life in action and heart. The Israelites left Egypt but unfortunately, Egypt had not left them because they kept wanting the things they had left behind.
- For Noah, the sign of covenant was the rainbow.
- For Abraham, the sign was circumcision.
- For the nation of Israel keeping the 7 feasts annually foreshadowed the coming and ministry of the Messiah.
 - Observing the Sabbath, setting aside a day of worship for God's people, was a sign between God and His people (collective)
...say to the Israelites, 'You must observe My Sabbaths. This will be as sign between Me and you for the generations to come so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy...'
Exodus 31:13

3. How does God test our covenantal faithfulness?

- When we enter into a covenant with God, through faith in Jesus Christ, what is at stake for us / for God?
For us, we commonly grapple with questions about trusting God.
Will He answer our prayers?
Will He supply our needs on time?
For God, what is at stake is the possibility that what God has invested in, by entering into covenant with us, will fail.
 - Abraham's test *Genesis 22:7-13*
 - Isaac, his son asked: Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?
 - Abraham replied: God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. In Abraham's reply to Isaac, God is placed in the position of being tested:
Can this God really be trusted?
 - A lamb is provided and Isaac is spared
God allowed Abraham to know his heart that his faith in God was reasonable even though he had to obey the command given to him.

- Test of faithfulness as covenant keepers

In every situation, God will test our faithfulness to the covenant.

- God remembered Noah when, by entering the ark, he was shut in the ark.

(God's place of safety) *Genesis 8:1*

When you are faithful to honour God in situations which you have no control over (like Noah who had no control over how long the flood waters would last), if it was God who shut you in, He will certainly remember you.

- We on the other hand, are to remember our covenant with God and to take it seriously. It is a vow to be kept.

...when you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfil it... Ecclesiastes 5:4, 5.

- Marriage covenant

What about our marriage covenant? The prophet Malachi says God is a witness to our marriage. He will take note of this wherever we are married, in church or elsewhere. The Holy Spirit can enable us to keep this covenant before God.

...the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His. And why one? Because He was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel...so guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith... Malachi 2:14-16

When we take our covenant-keeping seriously, God will take us seriously.

But when we break covenant, our prayers are hindered.

- What penalties would God impose?

- As Life-giver, He could impose premature death, wasting diseases.

(whom Adam broke the covenant, it was eternal death = separation from God).

- As Land-owner, eviction from the land so that we lose ownership of it.

- As Ruler, impose economic penalties (no money, no food, no security).

- As Decision Maker, He could remove anyone from positions of authority.

Psalms 75:7 says He brings down one and promotes another.

Our success depends on God's grace alone.

Application

- If you are married – Bless your spouse daily.
- If you are not baptised – Why not enter into a covenantal relationship with God?
- If you are baptised – Renew your commitment to speak up for Jesus and to speak well of Jesus' church / people / leaders.