

Becoming covenant people

The Bible is not just a history book, a compilation of testimonies, a collection of wonderful stories or examples of miracles. It's a book that contains covenants. To better understand the Bible requires us to understand the covenant agreements, and to understand how they relate to us as Christians.

As you read this, the questions I want you to consider are:

1. What is a covenant?
2. What are the features of a covenant?
3. What covenant(s) are we under? And with whom?
4. What are the benefits of those covenant(s) for us?

What is a covenant?

A covenant is an agreement, a pact, a promise, a contract or a mutual understanding between two or more parties that outlines the roles and responsibilities of each party under that same covenant. However, what makes the covenant we are discussing so unique, is that it's not your usual covenant between two people, but rather, one that is between God and man.

An interesting feature about a covenant with God is that there is no room to negotiate the terms: God sets all the terms. As recipients of that special covenant, you either accept or reject God's offer, but you do not have any say in determining the framework of the covenant.

Why we cannot negotiate the covenant with God

There are significant reasons as to why we cannot negotiate the agreements with God.

Firstly, we are His creation and God is our Creator—our very relationship with God means we will never have an equal standing with the Father. Which, I don't think, is such a bad position to be in. After all, He knows what's best for you and me, so I feel more comfortable with God being in control than me.

Second, as humans born with a sinful nature, we are not capable of keeping covenants, promises or pacts. Am I right? We are notorious in renegeing on promises, misinterpreting them or simply refusing to act on them. And we can't even be trusted to leave the contract alone, jumping at the first chance to try to change the conditions or clauses when we think it suits our needs; only to end up breaking them once again! We only have to look at Israel's track record with God to get an idea of how disastrous we humans can be when it comes to keeping promises.

And yet, the irony is that despite being bad at keeping them, covenants are baked into the fabric of our society. Those of you who remember being married to your wife or husband, will recall that you made a set of vows in front of witnesses in which both parties promise

to keep and fulfil those vows. God always intended for marriage vows to be binding for life (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6); and yet in Australia, the median length of marriage is only 12.1 years. In 2013, there were 118,000 couples who married, and 47,000 divorces granted. So, a God-ordained lifetime covenant that people willingly enter, is broken so often.

That's why I'm okay with God being in control of the terms and conditions of His covenant with us: He's far more trustworthy than me.

The covenant of blessings

A covenant with God is as sure and more stable than the everlasting hills (2 Samuel 23:5).

To better understand this let's look at perhaps one of the better known covenants made in the Bible, found in Genesis chapters 15 and 17. In these two chapters you will see the details of a covenant made between God (our Father) and Abraham. I like to call this a 'covenant of blessings'.

Genesis 15

“And [God] brought [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

“And he said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.’ But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

“As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’

“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’” (Genesis 15:5–18).

Genesis 17

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.’ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ‘Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.’

And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.’

And God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’ And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you!’ God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.’

“When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham” (Genesis 17:1–22).

This contractual agreement has often been called the ‘Abrahamic covenant.’ The Bible records that God appeared to Abraham on six occasions to make or reinforce those same promises. These are found in Genesis chapters 12, 13, 15, 17, 18 and 22. From these multiple appearances, we can gather the importance God gave this particular covenant.

The Abrahamic covenant can be described as 'unconditional.' This means that God's promises will be 100% fulfilled regardless of man's ability to keep or break any of the conditions under that same covenant.

How the covenant was formed

Let's look at the steps leading up to the sealing of this covenant in Genesis.

First off during Abraham's time, covenants were sealed by blood. Here's how it happened. An animal or animals would be cut straight down the middle, and each carcass was placed on either side. In the middle of the two pieces of carcass would be this great bloody path. Then both parties would be required to walk through the animal parts, repeating the terms of the covenant.

This symbolic act meant something extremely serious. It represented the promise that if a party to the covenant broke it, then they would forfeit their life. Thus, the only way out of a covenant was death (one way or another). So, the shedding of blood made the covenant binding for life.

In Genesis chapter 15, Abraham cut up the carcasses and was literally covered in blood. But rather than Abraham walk through the middle of the carcasses with God, God took that upon Himself. Abraham fell into vision, and saw God (the smoking fire pot; cf Ex 19:18) and His pre-incarnate son (the flaming torch; cf Ex 23:20-21; Ex 24:17) walking through the carcasses. This means that God entered into a covenant with Abraham, with God Himself being His own counter-party.

This implies that if the covenant was ever broken, that God Himself would bear the consequences of the inevitable bloodshed. And, of course, Abraham's offspring did break the covenant, meaning that God brought death upon Himself. That's the sort of God that Abraham worshiped; the sort of God that makes me implicitly trust. The fulfilment of the covenant was based purely upon God's grace.

The provisions of the covenant included the following:

1. A great nation was to come out of Abraham
2. Abraham was promised land
3. Abraham himself was to be greatly blessed
4. Abraham's name would be great
5. Abraham would be a blessing to others
6. Those who bless will be blessed, those who curse will be cursed
7. In Abraham, all the earth will ultimately be blessed
8. Other nations would come from Abraham
9. His name and that of Sarai was to be changed
10. There was to be a sign of the covenant (circumcision)

If we can turn this scenario into a modern court of law, what God was effectively saying is this that 'I, God, will hereby swear unto Myself to fulfil all My promises under this covenant, and bear the consequences of any failure to keep covenant.'

Reliability of God's covenant-keeping

Interesting, isn't it? God Himself is bound by the same conditions of the covenant and has to fulfil them. He cannot escape, forget or change His mind. By entering into this covenant God was saying, 'If I don't fulfil My word, then let Me suffer the consequences.'

Now, I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time God has ever, ever broken any of His promises. When He declared that His people would leave Egypt, they did, when He said they would have a new land flowing with milk and honey, they got it, when God promised David and countless other kings victories over their enemies, He delivered. When God said that Abraham's covenant would bless all families of the earth, He made it happen.

In case you're still asking yourself, 'Just how reliable is God with His promises?' That's like saying, 'Just how reliable is the Rock of Gibraltar?' I mean, oughtn't God be asking that question of *us*? Yet He still went ahead and made a covenant with man. So far, history is on God's side. If we are to measure God's track record in terms of delivering on His promises, He has proven to be 100% accurate, faithful and reliable.

The covenant man

Throughout the Bible, Abraham is held up to us as the model of a faithful covenant man. Abraham believed God, and God reckoned it to Him as righteousness. What was the nature of this faith? How could it be demonstrated? Well, God did just that. He arranged for a demonstration of the faith that pleased Him, so that we could all understand just what sort of faith that was. Read about this demonstration of faith.

Genesis 22

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.' And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together.

"When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to

slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

"And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:1–18).

Let's get one thing straight about Abraham: He was a 'covenant man'—he was not looking at the situation as anyone else would; he was 'covenant minded.' No matter what the outcome, God had already said that 'through your offspring [*seed*] I will bless you.' Those words must have still been resonating with Abraham and it's all that Abraham had to go by.

Abraham was faced with an excruciating decision—to obey God or not! The son God had promised, and against the odds delivered, would die! But then how would God fulfil His promises? It seemed impossible; yet Abraham trusted that God would deliver on His promises.

Abraham didn't know how God would do this, where He would do this, or when He would do this except that God had to deliver on His covenant by blessing him through his seed. So with knife in hand Abraham would have thought, 'God, I'm going to do this. I will sacrifice my one and only son but You have got to deliver on Your promise' (Genesis 17:21; 22:5; Hebrews 11:19). And here was the demonstration of ultimate faith.

Let me repeat what I said before, Abraham was a covenant man. He was living under God's covenant and that was sufficient for him. We are to live with that same visceral faith in, and faithfulness to, God.

Do we live under a covenant?

Recall the question I posed: "What covenant/s are we under? And with whom?"

This Abrahamic covenant is an everlasting agreement in which God swore by Himself to bless Abraham, his offspring [*seed*], and by so doing, to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

Well guess what? The Bible declares that Jesus inherited all the blessings included in the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3:16), and that those who believe in Jesus Christ, and are baptised into Jesus Christ, are therefore Abraham's seed, and heirs of the Abrahamic covenant blessings (Galatians 3:29).

Are you living the covenant promises?

As believers, we are Abraham's seed and therefore co-inheritors of the covenant of blessings that God made with Abraham.

Yet many believers do not understand the blessings they receive under this covenant. Anyone who lives outside the covenants of promise have no hope, being alienated from the life of God (Ephesians 2:12). The covenant God made with Abraham is as valid today as the day it was first made, thousands of years ago. You are able to benefit from the same blessings God had promised Abraham.

And this answers the next question: "What are the benefits of that covenant for us?" Well, the benefits are that those who inherit this covenant through God's faithfulness are no longer cut off from the life of God. We are no longer orphans being estranged from God's grace. No, we have been "brought near by the blood of Christ," we have been made part of the family of God (Ephesians 2:13, 19).

And more importantly, what do we need to do about it?

We need to be covenant men and women just like Abraham. God called (Genesis 12:1–3), and Abraham followed (Genesis 12:4). God promised (Genesis 15:5), and Abraham believed (Genesis 15:6). God commanded (Genesis 22:2), and Abraham obeyed (Genesis 22:3–10). So too, God calls us to be as committed to Him as Abraham was. Abraham obeyed God with all his heart, mind and strength. So too, we are to love, obey and serve God with all our heart, mind and strength. We are to be and to do as Abraham was. That's what it means to be covenant men and women; recipients of God's faithful promise to Abraham through Jesus Christ.

Clarifying the new covenant

After Jesus' death, the Apostles taught that Jesus had initiated the promised new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31, 32; Hebrews 9:15). There are some who think that this new covenant is separate to the Abrahamic covenant. But this is a clear misunderstanding, for Paul makes it clear that this new covenant is indeed the same covenant as that issued to Abraham (1 Corinthians 11:25; Galatians 3:22).

Everything in the Old Testament shows us that the Abrahamic covenant was already and always pointing forward to Christ. The covenant God had made with Abraham grants us a clear understanding of our inheritance through Christ.

"In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:14, 16).

God extends those same blessings and privileges that existed under the Abrahamic covenant to us through Jesus Christ. He was obligated to fulfil His promise to extend the blessings of Abraham to all nations, and he did so through Jesus Christ. So too, He is obligated to sharing the inheritance of the earth with all those under this new Abrahamic

covenant, and He will do so (2 Peter 3:13). From this vantage point, we can see that the promises made to Abraham are even more glorious when seen through the realisation and further promise of Jesus Christ.

The greatest promise now realised through the new covenant is eternal life.

“And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life” (1 John 2:25).

So God has a continuing obligation to fulfil His promise to us. Remember, He swore under no higher name than His own.

The promises He has made He will fulfil, because it is a large part of His unchanging character to do so. Remember earlier: If God promises, He delivers!

Your decision

God has offered you adoption into the family of faith who inherit the covenant promises, blessings and obligations. The decision as to whether you accept this offer to be a son or daughter of God through Jesus Christ is yours. Do you want to live under the covenant God has offered? Will you accept the obligations of the covenant? Will you accept the promised blessings? Does your heart sing when you hear God's call? Are you a covenant man or woman? Will you walk in Abraham's footsteps? Will you accept the call of Jesus Christ?

The decision as to whether you choose to be covered by this covenant is yours. Will you choose to be a covenant man or woman today?