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INTRODUCTION

If you were a great king in the ancient world, and you were determined to spread your rule over other nations, how would you administer your kingdom? How would you establish the fundamental policies of your empire as it grew larger and larger? These are good questions to ask as we study the Old Testament because the Old Testament presents God as the supreme divine King who is determined to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. Ancient Israelites knew that great human kings in their day ruled their expanding kingdoms through international treaties or covenants. So, it was no surprise to them to learn that God administered his expanding kingdom through covenants as well. God’s covenants established the basic policies that governed his kingdom as it spread throughout the earth.

This is the third lesson in our series Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament, and we’ve entitled it, “Divine Covenants.” In this lesson, we’ll explore how God governed his kingdom through a series of covenants to advance his kingdom throughout the world.

As we’re learning in this series, the books of the Old Testament canon were written to address God’s people in a variety of times and circumstances. Yet, the outlooks of each book rested on a set of beliefs that all Old Testament authors held in common. They all believed that God’s grand purpose in history was to expand his kingdom from heaven to the ends of the earth. And they also believed that God administered the expansion of his kingdom in different time periods through a series of major covenants. In effect, Old Testament authors wrote their books to further God’s kingdom by applying his covenant policies to the challenges of different situations. And for this reason, understanding God’s covenants is crucial to grasping the significance of every portion of the Old Testament.

Our exploration of divine covenants in the Old Testament will divide into four main parts. First, we’ll investigate the crucial connections between God’s kingdom and his covenants. Second, we’ll look into the history of God’s covenants in the Old Testament. Third, we’ll examine the dynamics of life in these covenants. And fourth, we’ll explore the people of God’s covenants. Let’s start with the connections between God’s kingdom and his covenants.

KINGDOM AND COVENANTS

Everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that the concept of covenant was crucial to the faith of Israel. The Hebrew term usually translated “covenant” — berith in Hebrew — appears more than 280 times in the Old Testament. And this concept of covenant is often associated with other terminology as well. The prominence of covenants in the Old Testament is undeniable. But sadly, many people misunderstand the basic
features of God’s covenants in the Scriptures. They fail to see how God’s covenants were inextricably linked to his rule as the divine king and to the growth of his kingdom on earth. How then did divine covenants relate to God’s kingdom? What’s the association between these two crucial teachings of the Old Testament?

To explore the connections between God’s kingdom purposes and his covenants, we’ll look in two directions. First, we’ll mention some recent archaeological discoveries that provide valuable backgrounds for understanding these connections. And second, we’ll see how these discoveries offer significant insights into the biblical concept of divine covenants. Let’s begin with some recent archaeological discoveries that shed light on our subject.

**ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES**

Christ’s followers rightly affirm that the Holy Spirit inspired the Old Testament Scriptures and that they are the Word of God for all times and places. But it’s always important to keep in mind that the Holy Spirit inspired these Scriptures in the first place for ancient Israelites. The cultural experiences of ancient Israelites set the stage for them to understand the revelation of God in their day. And as we’re about to see, a number of archeological discoveries made in the second half of the last century help us grasp how faithful Israelites understood that there were fundamental connections between God’s covenants and his kingdom.

Three types of royal documents from the ancient Near East often appear in discussions of biblical covenants: first, royal parity treaties — covenants in which kings of relatively equal status negotiated the terms of their relationships with each other; second, royal grants — writings that reveal how ancient kings formally bestowed lands or special status to their faithful servants; and third, suzerain-vassal treaties and other documents associated with them — international agreements that great kings established with lesser, subservient kings and their nations.

In reality, we can only garner a few insights into divine covenants in the Bible from royal parity treaties. To be sure, the Old Testament refers to human beings of equal status who mutually negotiated the terms of covenants between them. But, in regard to divine covenants, God never negotiated with human beings because no human being is his equal. In every instance, he sovereignly dictated all the terms of his covenants.

Beyond this, biblical scholars have pointed to some significant parallels between God’s covenants in the Bible and royal grants. They’ve noted, especially, connections that focus on Israel’s inheritance of the Promised Land and God’s choice of David’s house as Israel’s royal dynasty. But, as we’ll see later, these parallels have often been misunderstood.

By far, the ancient royal documents that have expanded our understanding of biblical divine covenants most are suzerain-vassal treaties. These ancient writings offer significant insights into how biblical authors understood the relationship between God’s kingdom and his covenants.

In the Old Testament world, the Pharaohs of Egypt, and the kings of the Hittites, Babylonians, Assyrians and even of Israel often extended their territories by conquering or annexing weaker kingdoms. And when they did this, they established the foundational
policies of their expanding kingdoms through treaties or covenants. Archeologists have
discovered a number of these international treaties and have referred to them as “suzerain-
vassal treaties.”

Now, don’t let the terms “suzerain” and “vassal” confuse you. “Suzerain” simply means an emperor or a great king. And of course, the term “vassal” means servant, or in this case, “servant of the great king.” Suzerain-vassal treaties established the basic policies that governed the interactions between great kings — suzerains — and lesser kings — vassals — and their nations. So, a suzerain-vassal treaty was an international agreement made between a great emperor and a lesser king and his nation.

Kingship in the ancient Near Eastern context … was largely grounded in the concept of covenant. So, we have evidence of treaties, ancient treaties, in which a king, or an overlord, or what’s called a “suzerain” would then enter into an agreement with some people who become essentially his servants or his vassals. And they define the relationship such that the overlord, the suzerain, defines a set of terms by which a relationship can be maintained. And he’d say something like this: “I will offer you protection; I will offer you prosperity; I will offer you identity in exchange for your participation with me by sharing a portion of your crops, by giving me your allegiance, and by not forming allegiances with other kings” or overlords. And so, it tended to be a very mutual sort of a circumstance in one sense. And if we begin to think about kingship and the nature of covenant in the terms of this kind of an agreement, then what we find is that various portions of the Old Testament seem to conform very precisely with the exact elements of these suzerain treaties.

— Dr. Bradley T. Johnson

Suzerain-vassal treaties typically contained seven main elements. They began with a preamble that identified the great king. This preamble was followed by a historical prologue that focused on the great king’s kind deeds toward his vassals. Next, these treaties turned to specific stipulations or laws that kings required their vassals to obey. Following these rules, there were usually provisions made for annual public readings and renewals of
these treaties, and lists of divine witnesses that called on the gods to ensure that all obligations were met. These treaties then turned to blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. And they usually closed with references to a ceremonial, sacrificial meal that formalized these international relationships.

Significant parallels exist between all seven of these elements and divine covenants throughout the Old Testament. But rather than touching on each of these elements, we’ll highlight the ways biblical covenants paralleled the underlying dynamics of these treaties.

The seven typical elements of suzerain-vassal treaties revealed an underlying, threefold dynamic that characterized the interactions between great kings and their vassals.

A threefold dynamic characterized suzerain-vassal treaties.

First, the treaties emphasized royal benevolence — the kindness that great kings showed to their vassals. In the preamble, the king would identify himself as the rightful ruler. Then the historical prologue would describe specific ways the king had shown kindness to his vassals. The theme of royal benevolence was so prominent that great kings often called themselves “father” and their vassals “sons.”

The second major focus of suzerain-vassal treaties was on the requirements of vassal loyalty. Vassals were to observe the laws of the king and offer tributes of precious metals, jewels, slaves, soldiers and portions of their harvests. These stipulations were spelled out so that vassals could demonstrate that they were grateful, loyal servants of their great kings.

The third major focus of suzerain-vassal treaties was on the consequences of blessings and curses. Great kings always reserved their royal prerogative to mete out blessings and curses in ways that served their kingdom purposes. But in suzerain-vassal treaties, kings proclaimed blessings that would come to their faithful vassals and warned of curses that would come to unfaithful vassals.

As we’ll see, these three central features of suzerain-vassal treaties help us understand more clearly the fundamental dynamics of the relationship between God and his covenant people in Scripture.
With these archaeological discoveries in mind, we should turn to the biblical insights they give us in regard to the vital connections between God’s kingdom and his covenants.

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS**

We should mention from the outset that the Old Testament describes many different relationships as covenants — relationships between friends, spouses, political leaders, tribes and nations. These human interactions were called covenants in the Old Testament because they formally bound people to each other with mutual obligations. At times, the Old Testament compares these diverse covenant relationships to God’s relationship with his people. So, we can learn much about our relationship with God from these different kinds of covenants in the Old Testament.

But our focus in this lesson is on what the Scriptures teach about God’s major covenants — the covenants by which he decisively administered his kingdom. We have in mind here six well-known, biblical covenants: God’s covenants in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and a future covenant that we often call the new covenant. In all of these instances, God directed his kingdom through covenants.

We’ll look at each of these major divine covenants later in this lesson. But at this point, we’ll illustrate how suzerain-vassal treaties give us insights into the nature of God’s covenants by looking briefly at his covenant in Moses. Looking at God’s covenant with Moses is important because the Scriptures reveal so much more about this covenant than any other covenant in the Old Testament.

When we look at the covenant God made with Moses, it quickly becomes apparent that it was structured in ways that resembled ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. Moses’ covenant consisted of the same three elements that we’ve seen in these treaties. And this resemblance helps us understand that, in a fundamental sense, God, the great King of Israel, established his covenants to administer his kingdom.

Consider Exodus 19:4-6 where God initiated his covenant with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai. God said:

> You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).
This passage introduces a lengthy record of God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai that extends from Exodus 19–24. Notice that it explicitly refers to God making “covenant” with Israel and that it connects this covenant with his kingdom. As we see here, this covenant was designed to serve God’s kingdom purposes by making Israel a “kingdom of priests.”

In this same passage, we can also see the basic threefold dynamic of royal benevolence, vassal loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses that characterized suzerain-vassal treaties.

First, God reminded the Israelites of the divine benevolence he’d shown when he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. As he said in verse 4:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

Much like ancient human kings, God reminded the Israelites that he had done great things for them. His benevolence was essential to the relationship he established with Israel through his covenant at Mount Sinai.

Second, God also called for human loyalty as he initiated this covenant. Listen again to verse 5:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples (Exodus 19:5).

Much like ancient Near Eastern suzerains, God required loyalty from the people of his kingdom. Although Moses’ covenant was initiated and sustained by God’s royal benevolence, God still required his people to obey his voice and to keep the stipulations of his covenant.

Third, Moses’ covenant also entailed consequences for Israel. This element becomes clear in verses 5-6:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

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As Israel’s divine king, God made it clear that if the Israelites were faithful, they would receive great blessings. They would be his treasured possession above all other nations. They would become a kingdom of priests to God, a holy nation. And as Exodus 19–24 illustrates time and again, if the Israelites were unfaithful, they would fall under God’s curses.

It would be difficult to deny these crucial parallels between suzerain-vassal treaties and God’s covenant with Israel in the days of Moses. But in recent decades, a number of biblical interpreters have argued that some of the other major biblical covenants more closely parallel royal grants. In their view, royal grants didn’t include the requirement of loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses. And in this light, these interpreters have argued that God’s covenants in Adam and Moses were like suzerain-vassal treaties; they were conditional, obligatory covenants. But from this outlook, God’s covenants in Noah, Abraham and David — and in some views even the new covenant — were like royal grants that were entirely unconditional, promissory covenants.

But viewing some biblical covenants as obligatory and others as promissory is inadequate. It’s true that some archeological examples of royal grants don’t explicitly mention the requirement of loyalty or blessings and curses. But many scholars have pointed out that a number of them do. And these scholars also rightly observe that kings in the ancient Near East always required obedience from their subjects. Every divine covenant established relationships between God as the king and his people as his vassals. So, every biblical passage that refers to God’s covenants directly addressed or presupposed divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses.

Sometimes biblical scholars have suggested that some covenants are promissory and others are obligatory; that the land that’s given to Abraham is a promissory covenant, and the law that’s given at Sinai is an obligatory covenant. But actually, what we see in the Bible and in the ancient Near East is that every covenant has both sides to it. Promises are being made, but also, it comes with an expectation of caring for and maintaining the relationship. So, we see that even in the land grant treaty where God gives Abraham land. Right after that, in chapter 17 and chapter 18 there’s this expectation that, “You will walk before me, and you will teach your children my ways. You will walk in righteousness and in justice.” So, God gives great gifts in his covenant, but also there is this expectation of love, of loyalty, of devotion to the Great King.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

Now that we’ve introduced the fundamental connection between God’s kingdom and his covenants, let’s turn to our second main topic in this lesson: the history of the covenants in the Old Testament.
The Old Testament provides us with historical records of how God’s kingdom developed on the earth before the incarnation of Christ. And these Scriptures reveal that in the days of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, and then later in the new covenant, God dramatically intervened in history to make covenants. Now, all of these covenants were designed to administer the expansion of God’s kingdom. But they emphasized different policies that were appropriate for God’s kingdom at different stages in history.

There are many ways to describe the history of divine covenants in the Old Testament. But we’ll divide God’s covenants into three groups: first, God’s early universal covenants; second, his national covenants with Israel; and third, the new covenant — the covenant that Old Testament prophets predicted would unfold at the climax of history. Let’s turn first to the universal covenants.

**Universal Covenants**

When we speak of the covenants with Adam and Noah as “universal,” we have in mind that God made them with all of humanity in the primeval history before he chose Israel as his special people. In this sense, when we ask “To whom has God shown benevolence? Who is obligated to be loyal to God? Who stands to receive the consequences
of his blessings and curses?” The answer is: every person who has ever lived. *All* images of God are in covenant with God because they are bound to him through his covenants with Adam and Noah.

So, these two covenants, with Adam and with Noah, make wonderful promises to mankind. The first one is that God will send the seed of a woman, one of Eve’s descendants, a human being who will be our Savior; this is the God-man Jesus Christ. And he promises Noah that despite how wicked the world becomes — and it is increasingly becoming more wicked as time goes on — he will never again destroy it with some catastrophic flood or some natural judgment as he did in the days of Noah… So, these two covenants with Adam and with Noah … look at a much broader audience and a broader work of God in the salvation of the world than even the more national covenants with Abraham and Moses and David.

— Dr. Mike Ross

We’ll look at these universal covenants in chronological order, beginning with God’s covenant in Adam and then moving to his covenant in the days of Noah. Let’s consider first God’s covenant in Adam.

**Adam**

The historical record of God’s covenant with humanity in Adam appears in Genesis 1–3. As we all know, Adam was the first human being, so we’re referring to the earliest period of human history. Not surprisingly, we find that the Bible’s teaching about Adam’s covenant focuses on some of the most basic or foundational dimensions of human interaction with God.

Now, we should mention that the word “covenant” does not appear in the first three chapters of Genesis. And for this reason, some Christians don’t agree that God made a formal covenant with Adam. Even so, three pieces of evidence strongly suggest that God did, in fact, make his first covenant with Adam as the representative of humanity.

First, as we’ll see later in this lesson, the basic dynamics of divine covenants — benevolence, human loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses — appear throughout Genesis 1–3.

A second evidence that God entered into covenant with Adam appears in Hosea 6:7. There we read these words:

Like Adam [or humanity] they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me (Hosea 6:7).
This passage compares Israel’s rebellion against God in the days of Hosea with Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden. And it speaks of how Israel had transgressed, or broken, God’s covenant, just like Adam had in his day.

A third evidence that God entered into a covenant with Adam appears in Genesis 6:18. This is the first passage in the Bible where the term “covenant” — or berith (ברית) in Hebrew — actually occurs. Here, God spoke to Noah in this way:

I will establish my covenant with you (Genesis 6:18).

This passage is significant because it doesn’t use the normal terminology for initiating a covenant. Normally, the Hebrew verb karath (קָרַת) — which literally means “to cut” — was used to describe making a new covenant. But the word translated “establish” here is from the Hebrew verb qum (קוּם) which means “to confirm” or to establish a covenant that has already been initiated. When God said to Noah that he was about to establish his covenant with him, he meant that he was about to confirm an existing covenant — namely the covenant God had made previously with Adam.

The covenant that God made in the days of Adam addressed the most fundamental features of God’s interactions with humanity. For this reason, we may call it God’s “covenant of foundations.” In this covenant, God set the fundamental patterns of life for all human beings. Adam and Eve were ordained to serve as God’s royal and priestly images and to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. God tested their loyalty. And he offered great blessings to Adam and Eve, if they obeyed him. But their disloyalty led to the consequences of divine curses. In short, the covenant with Adam established the foundations of our role in his kingdom.

Following God’s covenant in Adam, the second universal covenant is God’s covenant in the days of Noah. There’s much that could be said about this covenant, but we’ll simply touch on some of the central issues that come to the foreground in the biblical account.

Noah

God’s covenant with Noah was also established in the primeval period of God’s kingdom and concerned some of the most basic issues that face all of humanity. The covenant in Noah is first mentioned before the flood in Genesis 6, and then again after the flood in chapter 9. Listen to what God said in Genesis 6:18:

I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you (Genesis 6:18).

Before the flood, God promised by covenant that if Noah met the conditions of building the ark and bringing the animals into the ark, he would rescue Noah and his family. After the flood, in Genesis 9:9-11, we see a renewal of God’s covenant in Noah. In this passage, God told Noah:

I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with
every living creature that is with you … never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood (Genesis 9:9-11).

As we see here, God’s covenant in Noah was not simply made with Noah and his offspring and “every living creature” that was in the ark. God insured that “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood.”

God made his covenant with Noah after humanity’s rebellion against God had brought the great flood of God’s judgment. But after the flood, God’s covenant with Noah ensured the stability of the created order. And for this reason, we may refer to it as God’s “covenant of stability.” When Noah and his family left the ark, God acknowledged humanity’s propensity toward sin. And by covenant, he set in place a long-term strategy so that sinful human beings would be able to fulfill his kingdom purposes. As we read in Genesis 8:21-22:

The Lord said … “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:21-22).

To advance his kingdom, God promised that nature would remain stable so that sinful human beings could have opportunity to fulfill their service to him. This universal covenant, like the covenant with Adam, established basic kingdom policies that still apply to all people in all places and at all times.

As we’ve just seen, the history of God’s major covenants began with universal covenants in Adam and Noah. Now, we should turn our attention to the national covenants — covenants that God made when Old Testament Israel moved to the center stage of his kingdom purposes.

**National Covenants**

We’ll also look at the national covenants in chronological order, beginning with the covenant in Abraham, then the covenant with Israel in Moses and finally the covenant in David. Let’s start with God’s covenant in Abraham.

**Abraham**

Abraham was the patriarch or father of every Israelite. And for this reason, God...
made his first national covenant through Abraham. We find direct references to this covenant in Genesis 15, 17. The first mention of God’s covenant with Abraham — or “Abram” as he was called then — appears in Genesis 15:18:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:18).

Here the expression “made a covenant” is literally “cut a covenant,” using the Hebrew term karath (כָּרַת). As we mentioned earlier, this was the normal way of indicating the beginning of a covenant relationship. Then, a number of years later, God affirmed or renewed his covenant with the Patriarch. In Genesis 17:1-2 we read these words:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you (Genesis 17:1-2, NIV).

This is not a second, different covenant with Abraham. Rather, God said that he would “confirm” his covenant between himself and Abraham. The word “confirm” translates the Hebrew verb qum (קום). This is the same expression that we saw in Genesis 6:18 when God established, or confirmed, the covenant with Adam in his covenant with Noah.

God, whenever he speaks of it, he speaks of, “my covenant with Abraham.” He never refers to more than one. And he can even refer — when he’s reaffirming that covenant with Isaac and Jacob — he can refer to “the oath I swore to Abraham,” for instance, which is standing for the whole covenant, and it includes all the promises made in Genesis 12, 15, 17 and 22. And Peter makes similar remarks at Pentecost. And so, the biblical take on it, one would never think from the way the Bible refers to it that there’s more than one covenant… I think any other interpretation, then, becomes a bit forced because all of the evidence most naturally invites the understanding that God only made one covenant with Abraham.

— Dr. Jeffrey J. Niehaus

The covenant with Abraham set his descendants apart from the rest of humanity. Through this covenant, God chose Israel to take a leading role in spreading his kingdom throughout the world. Abraham’s descendants would possess the Promised Land. They would increase in number. And they would spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. And for this reason, Abraham’s covenant may be described as both God’s covenant of promise to Israel and his “covenant of Israel’s election.” As we read in Genesis 15:18:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land” (Genesis 15:18)
And in Genesis 17:2:

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:2, NIV).

God’s covenant with Abraham established God’s kingdom purposes for Israel as his chosen people.

After God had made his covenant with Abraham, God made another national covenant — the covenant with Israel in Moses.

**Moses**

It’s important to realize that Israel’s covenant in the days of Moses was not contrary to God’s covenant with Abraham. Moses did not see himself as providing an alternative to God’s covenant with Abraham. On the contrary, Moses frequently appealed to the covenant with Abraham as the basis of his own kingdom work. Listen to the way Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the nation in Exodus 32:13:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, “I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever” (Exodus 32:13).

As we see here, the national covenant with Moses was not a brand-new covenant that replaced the covenant with Abraham. Rather, it was built on and furthered the covenant of election that God had made with Abraham.

We find the primary record of God entering covenant with Israel in the days of Moses in Exodus 19–24. We also find a renewal of this covenant with the second generation of the exodus in the book of Deuteronomy. As God gathered the twelve tribes of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, he shaped them into a great nation, a politically unified people. Of course, there had been rules and regulations for God’s people before the time of Moses. But like every new nation, one of Israel’s chief needs at this time was a system of laws, a body of regulations to govern them. For this reason, the covenant with Moses may rightly be called God’s “covenant of law.” In fact, Moses’ covenant stressed the law so much that when the people of Israel entered this covenant, they made a solemn commitment to keep all of God’s law. In Exodus 19:7-8 we’re told:

So Moses … set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:7-8).

So, we see that the second covenant with the nation of Israel was the covenant with Moses, a covenant that stressed precisely what the nation needed at this time, the law of God.
Now, after looking at God’s covenants with Abraham and Moses, we should turn to Israel’s last national covenant in the Old Testament.

**David**

When Israel became a full-fledged kingdom, God made a covenant with king David. God’s covenant with David was not out of accord with God’s covenant at Mount Sinai. Rather, it was built on and furthered the covenant with Moses. As Solomon made clear in 2 Chronicles 6:16, God’s promises to David were dependent on faithfulness to Moses’ law. As we read:

> Now therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, “You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk in my law as you have walked before me” (2 Chronicles 6:16).

As this passage indicates, God’s covenant with David focused on the royal house of David, but David’s house was required “to walk in [God’s] law” — the law of Moses. Typically, biblical interpreters suggest that God made this covenant at the height of David’s reign in 2 Samuel 7. Even though this chapter doesn’t use the word “covenant,” several passages refer explicitly to the fact that God made a covenant with David. As just one example, listen to God’s promise to David in Psalm 89:3-4:

> I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: “I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations” (Psalm 89:3-4).

As we see here, David’s covenant focused on kingship in Israel. Or to be more specific, it established David’s house as the permanent royal dynasty “for all generations” of Israel.

God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 is of great significance for redemptive history. This is a pivotal chapter in understanding the history of redemption in general... We see in this chapter what is called the Davidic covenant. It’s a very important covenant in which we see a new perspective on the Savior, that this Savior will be the son of David. The term “son of David” is not an ordinary term in Scripture. Each time you see “son of David,” it’s necessary to remember the word “king.” David was the king, and in this chapter, the Lord promised him that his son would sit on the throne — the throne of the kingdom — forever. One of David’s offspring would be the king forever on David’s throne.

— Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation
When David became king over God’s people, God advanced his kingdom by establishing David’s house as the line that would rule over Israel in perpetuity. From that time forward, it was through the faithful rule of David’s house that Israel would fulfill its role in spreading God’s kingdom to the ends of the earth. For this reason, we may call David’s covenant God’s “covenant of kingship.”

Now that we’ve seen how the history of God’s covenants includes universal and national covenants, we should look at the new covenant, the covenant that Old Testament prophets predicted God would make during the final stage of his kingdom.

NEW COVENANT

Most evangelical Christians are familiar with what the Scriptures teach about the new covenant because it’s a crucial focus of New Testament teaching. But all too often, we fail to understand that what the New Testament tells us about the new covenant is rooted in what Old Testament prophets said about the new covenant. From their perspective, the new covenant is the fulfillment of every previous biblical covenant. And it reflects how God will administer his kingdom when his kingdom purposes are fulfilled in the last days through the Messiah.

A number of prophets predicted that God would make a covenant with a faithful remnant of the house of Israel and the house of Judah after their exile had ended. And at that time, God’s kingdom would spread through the Messiah to the ends of the earth. Listen to how Jeremiah 31:31 speaks of the “new covenant”:

The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31).

In Ezekiel 37:26, and on several other occasions, the prophet Ezekiel spoke of this same covenant as an everlasting “covenant of peace.” As we read:

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever (Ezekiel 37:26).

And, as all Christians know, in 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul made it clear that this everlasting new covenant of peace came to fulfillment in Christ when he reminded the Corinthians of Jesus’ words at the Lord’s Supper:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Through this new covenant in Christ, God administers his kingdom in the New Testament age. The new covenant governs God’s people as Christ fulfills all that God accomplished in his earlier covenants. And for this reason, it’s appropriate to speak of it as God’s “covenant of fulfillment.”
This covenant of fulfillment was to govern God’s people when he ended their exile and spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. The new covenant is God’s commitment to transform his people into a forgiven and redeemed race that is fully empowered to serve him without fail. Listen to the way Jeremiah described this redemption in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah… I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Now, we must always remember that Christ fulfills the final stage of God’s kingdom in three phases. He inaugurated it through his earthly ministry, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the work of his apostles. It continues throughout church history. And it will reach its consummation when Christ returns in glory. On that day, the new covenant will be the fulfillment of the entire history of God’s covenants. It will bring to fruition God’s purposes behind the covenant administrations in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.

Hebrews 8 talks about the establishment of the new covenant, and this is not a brand-new covenant. This covenant was promised in the Old Testament. In fact, he quotes from Jeremiah 31, the promise of a new covenant. God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, but he promises that one day — Israel had broken that covenant — and one day God would reestablish a new covenant, and that new covenant wouldn’t have the law written on tablets of stone. It would have the law written on our hearts… So, the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 has come to fulfillment, and that’s what the author is arguing. And with that promise of fulfillment, God’s salvation is now not just for Israel but is going forth to all nations everywhere. So, all
along, the author says, this is what God had intended, this the fulfillment of the promises.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

Having seen the connections between God’s kingdom and covenants and how God advanced his kingdom throughout the history of his covenants, we should turn to our third topic: the dynamics of the covenants.

**DYNAMICS OF THE COVENANTS**

As we mentioned earlier in this lesson, some interpreters have denied that the basic dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses appear in all divine covenants. It’s true that the biblical record of each Old Testament covenant has distinctive emphases. Yet, when we keep in view the broader biblical portrait of Old Testament history, we can see that the dynamics of God’s interactions with his people remained consistent under each administration of each covenant.

Adam’s covenant stressed certain foundational patterns established at the commencement of the world. Noah’s covenant emphasized the stability of nature. Abraham’s covenant accentuated God’s promises and election. Moses’ covenant emphasized God’s law. David’s covenant highlighted the Davidic dynasty as God’s specially-chosen royal family. And the new covenant stressed fulfillment.

But these emphases are not comprehensive descriptions of covenant life; they merely touch on certain highlights. To see a fuller picture of the dynamics of living in covenant we must recognize that life in covenant with God involved much more than these emphases. The dynamics of living in covenant with God always involve the benevolence of God, the requirement of human loyalty, and consequences for human loyalty and disloyalty.

Having said this, it’s important never to think of these covenant dynamics as operating mechanically, as if God’s implementation of covenant dynamics was always predictable. Rather, God always reserved his royal prerogative as he dealt with individuals, groups and humanity as a whole. He exercised his right as the king to implement the dynamics of his covenants in ways that fulfilled his grand kingdom purposes. He showed benevolence when he saw fit. He stressed
certain standards of loyalty according to his royal wisdom. He meted out blessings and
curses at his own discretion.

Often, we can’t fathom why God showed benevolence to some people and not to
others. We struggle to understand why he considered some standards of loyalty more
significant for some people than for others. At times, we’re unable to explain why God poured out blessings
on some people and curses on others. Many times, Old Testament authors explained why God exercised his
royal prerogative in this or that way. At other times, they did not. Still, we know that God is good and that
his wisdom far surpasses our own. So, we humbly accept how he handled the basic dynamics of life in
covenant with him.

To unpack how the dynamics of God’s covenants permeate the Old Testament, we’ll touch
briefly on each Old Testament covenant. First, we’ll look at the primeval universal covenants. Second, we’ll
consider the national covenants God made with Old Testament Israel. And third we’ll look at the new
covenant in Christ. Let’s look first at these dynamics in the universal covenants.

**Universal Covenants**

As you’ll recall, during the primeval history, God established a covenant of
foundations with Adam and a covenant of natural stability with Noah. But God’s
interactions with Adam didn’t simply amount to the establishment of kingdom foundations.
And, under Noah’s covenant, interactions between humanity and God involved much more
than the stability of nature. As in all divine covenants, God administered life under these
covenants through the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences
for obedience and disobedience.

We’ll look briefly at how this is true for each of the universal covenants; first in the
covenant with Adam and then in the covenant with Noah. Let’s start with Adam.

**Adam**

In the first place, God showed much benevolence toward the first man and woman,
even before they sinned. He prepared the world for humanity, taking it from chaos into
order. And he formed a splendid garden and placed Adam and Eve within that garden. And
day by day God bestowed all kinds of privileges on the human race that extended even
beyond the fall into sin.

All biblical covenants display God’s benevolence in several ways. One
simple way we can see this is that God, without having any obligation,
decides to enter into a relationship with his people... Also, divine benevolence is displayed in how God gives many blessings for his people to enjoy. In the case of Adam and Eve, in the first covenant, divine benevolence was shown in how the Lord put at their disposal all that he had created.

— Dr. David Correa, translation

In the second place, the covenant with Adam also required human loyalty. In addition to requiring Adam and Eve to serve him as his images, God tested their loyalty with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As God commanded in Genesis 2:16-17:

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat (Genesis 2:16-17).

Even after Adam and Eve failed to pass this test, God continued to require human loyalty of them and their immediate descendants. And in the third place, there were consequences for Adam and Eve’s obedience and disobedience. God explicitly told Adam and Eve that they would suffer the consequences of his curse if they were disloyal and ate the forbidden fruit. In Genesis 2:17 God told them:

In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Genesis 2:17).

And by implication, if Adam and Eve had passed this test by obeying God’s command, they would have been greatly blessed.

Adam’s life with God involved all of the dynamics of God’s covenant. And, as we know from the book of Genesis, what was true for Adam and Eve was true day by day for the generations who lived under God’s covenant with Adam. At God’s royal discretion, through this period of history, life with God continued to involve divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences.

In addition to the universal covenant with Adam, Noah and others under his covenant also lived before God in terms of the same threefold dynamic.

Noah

First, God’s benevolence prepared the way for Noah’s covenant. When God determined to destroy the human race in his righteous judgment, he also determined to save Noah and his family. As we read in Genesis 6:8:

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).

God showed much kindness to Noah and his family. And similar kindnesses extended beyond the days of Noah to his descendants.
Second, God required loyalty from Noah. He commanded him to build the ark and to gather animals. Listen to Genesis 6:18-19 where the covenant with Noah is associated closely with Noah’s responsibility. There we read:

I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark …
And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you (Genesis 6:18-19).

Noah was responsible to show loyalty to his divine King by entering the ark with his family and by bringing animals with him to keep them alive. And even after the flood, in Genesis 9:7, God called Noah and his descendants to fulfill the role of humanity as God’s images. Among other things he said:

And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it (Genesis 9:7).

God continued to call Noah and later generations to be loyal to him.

Third, there were consequences for human actions of obedience and disobedience during the period of Noah’s covenant. Noah himself was faithful to God. So, God was pleased with his sacrifice after the flood and blessed him with a stable world. As we read in Genesis 8:20-21:

Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, [even though] the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done” (Genesis 8:20-21).

But God also made it clear after the flood that rebellion against him would have severe consequences of curses. For instance, in Genesis 9:6 God addressed the curse that would come upon murderers:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed (Genesis 9:6).

As the record of Genesis illustrates in many ways, the full range of covenant dynamics continued to impact the lives of every person during the period of Noah’s covenant.

Now the dynamics of God’s covenants did not only characterize life during the primeval universal covenants. They also shaped life before God during the national covenants that God made with Israel.
NATIONAL COVENANTS

The Abrahamic covenant emphasized Israel’s election and promise, the Mosaic covenant highlighted the giving of the law, and the Davidic covenant accentuated David’s permanent dynasty. But life during the covenant with Abraham entailed more than Israel’s election and promises. The time of Moses’ covenant involved much more than the giving of the law. And during the epoch of David’s covenant, God’s interactions with his people involved more than just David’s dynasty. Just as in the earlier covenants, each national covenant was shaped by divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses.

Once again, we’ll look at these national covenants in the order in which they appear: first, the covenant with Abraham; second, the covenant with Moses; and third, the covenant with David. Let’s begin with Abraham.

Abraham

In the first place, God showed much benevolence to Abraham. For example, God demonstrated great kindness to Abraham when he first called Abraham to migrate to Canaan. Consider Genesis 12:2 where God said:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:2).

Throughout Abraham’s life, God showed mercy to the Patriarch. He forgave him of sin, counted him as righteous and protected him from troubles. And the same was true for every generation of Abraham’s descendants under God’s covenant with him.

Second, God also required loyalty from the Patriarch. For instance, even in God’s initial call, Abraham was required to obey. As we read in Genesis 12:1 God commanded him:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

God required Abraham to leave his homeland and family and to go to a place that he had never seen. And in Genesis 17:1-2, God reminded Abraham of the requirement of loyalty when he confirmed his covenant in these words:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:1-2, NIV).

Although many Christians fail to see it, Abraham’s covenant relationship with God entailed the requirement of loyalty. Time and again God required obedience from Abraham and all of his descendants under his covenant.

If you look at Abraham’s relationship with God, it was one that was sovereignly initiated. It was sealed where God … took the curses of the
covenant toward himself in the splitting of the animals in Genesis 15, but none of that removed the conditions upon Abraham. And so, obedience to God’s commands, which we could easily call that “faithfulness” to God’s commands, faithfulness to trust the Lord, is the mechanism by which he administers the blessings of the covenant.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Third, God also made it clear that there were consequences for Abraham’s obedience and disobedience. Listen once again to Genesis 17:1-2. In verse 1 God told Abraham:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless (Genesis 17:1, NIV).

And then in verse 2:

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:2, NIV).

God explicitly stated that the increase of Abraham’s descendants would be a consequence of blessing for Abraham’s obedience. And correspondingly, God also said that disloyalty would result in severe curses. As just one more example, listen to what he told Abraham in Genesis 17:10-14:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised… 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 (Genesis 17:10-14).

God required circumcision as a sign of commitment to covenant loyalty so that if any of his male descendants were not circumcised, they would suffer the curse of being cut off from his people. They would be excluded from the blessings of covenant life.

All three covenant dynamics shaped Abraham’s personal interactions with God, and they continued to regulate the lives of others after him.

The second national covenant that God made with Israel was the covenant in Moses at Mount Sinai. As we’ve seen, this covenant stressed God’s law. But it would be a terrible mistake to think that other covenant dynamics were absent from life under Moses’ covenant.

**Moses**

To see that all covenant dynamics were operative in Moses’ covenant, let’s look briefly at the centerpiece of this covenant, the Ten Commandments. First, divine
benevolence is evident in the prologue that precedes God’s laws. You’ll recall that the Ten Commandments begin this way in Exodus 20:2:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

The covenant with Moses was not a covenant of works; it was founded on God’s mercy and grace. And God continued to show kindness like this to the generations of Israel throughout the period of God’s covenant with Moses. Even so, the Ten Commandments also make it very clear that God required loyalty from his people. As the first commandment puts it in Exodus 20:3:

You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).

Divine grace was not contrary to human loyalty. Rather, it supported and led to the grateful response of loyalty from Israel.

Before God gives any laws to his people, God reminds them of his grace — “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” And what that does is sets up the rest of the Ten Commandments, not as laws to become God’s people, but gives God’s people an ethos, or a way of life, that allows them to respond to God’s grace… In the first commands we have, essentially, how do you love God? And you love God by having no other gods before the Lord, by not making graven images or images of God, and by not taking the Lord’s name in vain… Then the second half of the Ten Commandments, starting with “Honor your father and mother,” is we have a series of laws that give us standards for interacting with other people, because with the God of the Scriptures, it’s not just a personal spirituality; there’s a communal piece to this. It’s not enough to simply love God. That’s the critical piece, but then that has to then be expressed in the way that we live and love other people, and that’s the second part of the Ten Commandments.

— Dr. Brian D. Russell

Beyond this, the Ten Commandments also speak of the consequences of obedience and disobedience. In Exodus 20:4-6 we read:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image … You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).
Now that we’ve seen the dynamics of God’s covenants with Abraham and Moses, let’s look at the last national covenant with Old Testament Israel — the covenant with David. This covenant stressed that God was establishing David’s line as the permanent dynasty to rule over Israel.

David

Of course, when we look at the larger record of the lives of David and his descendants, it becomes apparent that life in this covenant involved divine benevolence, human loyalty and consequences for obedience and disobedience. For example, listen to the way Psalm 89:3-4 comments on God’s benevolence toward David:

You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations’” (Psalm 89:3-4).

These verses reflect on the benevolence God showed to David by choosing and upholding him and his descendants as the rightful kings of Israel. But God also required loyalty, and threatened consequences of curses for disobedience in this covenant. Listen to Psalm 89:30-32:

If his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my rules … I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes (Psalm 89:30-32).

As we see here, if David’s sons forsook God’s laws, they would be punished severely. But as countless passages tell us, great blessings would come to David and his descendants if they were faithful to God. And of course, blessings and curses on the house of David impacted the lives of all of God’s people from this time forward.

With the dynamics of life in the universal and national covenants in mind, we’re ready to turn to the new covenant, the covenant of fulfillment.

NEW COVENANT

God administered the forward movement of his kingdom by building one covenant on top of another throughout Old Testament history. But as we know, by the time Jesus came to earth, Israel had so flagrantly rebelled against God that he had poured out severe curses on his people. Only a remnant of Israelites remained faithful. But in the new covenant, the kingdom of God reaches its fulfillment. And the kingdom of God spreads to the ends of the earth through the kingship of Christ. In this sense, the new covenant doesn’t oppose what God had done in the past. Rather, it fulfills what he had purposed for his kingdom throughout history. So, it shouldn’t surprise us at all to find that the threefold dynamic of life in covenant with God is characteristic of the new covenant as well.
In the first place, the new covenant involves divine benevolence. God promised to show great kindness to his exiled people as he established the new covenant. As Jeremiah 31:34 reads:

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

In this and many other ways, the new covenant clearly displays God’s tender mercy. At the same time, human loyalty is also a factor in the new covenant. God doesn’t promise to do away with his laws, and he doesn’t exempt anyone from obeying them. On the contrary, he enables them to be loyal. In fact, God promised in Jeremiah 31:33:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

In the period of the new covenant, God will give his people a love for his law so that they earnestly obey him. And finally, the consequences of blessings and curses are also evident in the new covenant. As Jeremiah 31:33 continues:

I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31:33).

This declaration offers assurance that God will bring great blessings to his people because he will enable them to keep the obligations of his covenant. And by implication, anyone who does not keep these obligations will not receive this blessing.

What will distinguish the new covenant from the old covenant is the people’s ability to keep it. In Jeremiah 31, God says that he will write the law on their hearts, that he will put his law in their midst, and then he follows this with the covenant formula — “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Well, to understand how it is that God is going to write the law on his people’s hearts, it’s very helpful to go to a very similar passage in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 36, God says not that he will put his law in their midst, but that he will put his Spirit in their midst. And he doesn’t say that he will write the law on their hearts, but rather he says, “I will cause them to obey my statutes and to follow my rules.” And then, as he does in Jeremiah 31, he follows this again with the covenant formula — “I will be their God and they will be my people.” So, looking at these prophetic texts together, we see that the way that God will write the law on his people’s hearts is by putting his Spirit in their midst. By the indwelling presence of God himself, he will cause his people in the new covenant era to keep his law. And so, in the new covenant, it is secure not because of our faithfulness but because of the instrumentation of God’s Spirit who is living and working in our midst.

— Dr. Matthew Newkirk

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Now, we must always remember that the new covenant comes into effect in three stages, following the pattern of the final phase of God’s kingdom in Christ. The new covenant was inaugurated in the first coming of Christ and in the work of his apostles. Throughout church history, the new covenant continues to come to fruition through the power of Christ working in the church. And the new covenant will reach its completion when Christ returns in glory at the consummation of the age.

First, the New Testament emphasizes that the new covenant was inaugurated by divine benevolence when the Father sent his Son to the world. It also stresses that Christ himself was faithful to every requirement of human loyalty, even to the point of death on the cross. And it also emphasizes that Christ received the blessing of resurrection from the dead. And as a result, all who have saving faith in Christ are made acceptable to God. As the writer of Hebrews put it in Hebrews 9:12-15:

> [Christ] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption… Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 9:12-15).

God intervened in history to establish the new covenant by sending his Son to keep every detail of God’s law and to offer himself as a perfect and complete sacrifice for sin. And his sacrifice brings eternal forgiveness to all who believe in him.

It’s a wonderful Christian doctrine in that, unlike the Old Testament where the mediator, the priest, had to offer the bulls and the goats year in and year out for the forgiveness of sin, Jesus actually entered the most Holy of Holies once and for all, as the Bible tells us. When he died on the cross, when he shed his blood for our sins, it meant that he created an access for us to go to the Lord so that we can actually have someone who can represent us where we can enter the Holy of Holies through his blood.

— Dr. Vuyani Sind

Now, despite the importance of Christ’s saving work in his first coming, the great salvation of the new covenant also depends on the continuation of Christ’s work as the mediator of the new covenant. Day by day Christ intercedes on behalf of his people before the throne of his Father in heaven. In Hebrews 7:24-25, the writer of Hebrews pointed to this reality when he wrote these words:

> [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:24-25).

Because of the benevolence of God, Christ reigns and intercedes on our behalf. He deals with our failures and ensures our eternal blessings.
And finally, because Christ has paid for our sins and continues to intercede on our behalf, we can be confident that the consummation of God’s kingdom in Christ will come one day. When that day comes, we’ll see the benevolence of God as never before. As the writer of Hebrews explained in Hebrews 9:28:

Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).

When that day comes, every person who has trusted Christ will be perfectly loyal to the will of God, and we will receive the blessing of eternal life in the new heavens and new earth.

When we think of our Lord’s work, we often think of it in terms of first coming and second coming. He, in his first coming — life, death, resurrection — has brought the kingdom to this world. He has brought the new covenant era. He has brought the full forgiveness of sins. He has defeated sin, defeated death, defeated the Evil One... When he comes again, he will then put sin and death and the Devil completely under his feet so that evil will be destroyed, the books will be balanced, final judgment will take place, where in a public way, sin and death is dealt with, those who are not his will be cast in judgment for everlasting. Those who are his will enjoy the fruit and benefit of the new heavens and new earth, and then we will see everything brought to its end.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Now that we’ve considered God’s kingdom and his covenants, the history of his covenants and the basic dynamics of God’s covenants, we should turn to our final topic: the people of God’s covenants.

**PEOPLE OF THE COVENANTS**

As God administered his kingdom through covenants, he always engaged with people. And this shouldn’t surprise us. Human beings are God’s royal, priestly images, created to spread his kingdom throughout the earth. But in reality, God’s covenants involved various kinds of people at different times. How does this variety appear in the Scriptures? And what difference does it make as we consider the people of God’s covenants?

To answer these questions, we’ll look at two issues. First, we’ll see how God’s covenants engaged different divisions of humanity in various ways. And second, we’ll see how these divisions impacted the application of covenant dynamics for the people of God’s
covenants. Let’s look first at how God made covenants with different divisions of the human race.

**DIVISIONS OF HUMANITY**

The Bible describes three divisions of humanity in relation to God’s covenants.

Everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that it often distinguishes between different sorts of individuals and groups of people — men and women, old and young, the powerful and the weak, to mention just a few. Now of course, it’s impossible for us to deal with all of this variety in detail. But it will help to focus on a number of large groups of people that often took center stage in what the Bible tells us about divine covenants.

We’ll deal with these divisions of humanity first by noting how both believers and unbelievers are included within God’s covenants. Then we’ll see the division between people who are included and those who are excluded from God’s covenants. Let’s begin with the fact that there are both believers and unbelievers within God’s covenants.

**Within Covenants**

Christians often assume that only true believers have ever entered into covenant with God, but this is hardly the case. You’ll remember that we spoke of God’s covenants in Adam and Noah as universal covenants because they bound all people to God. And once
humanity fell into sin, this was true for both believers and unbelievers. The foundational principles of God’s kingdom established in Adam’s covenant applied to those who had saving faith, like Abel and Seth, and those who did not, like Cain and his murderous descendant Lamech. In much the same way, the covenant of stability in nature in the days of Noah also held for both believers, like Noah’s son Shem, as well as unbelievers, like Noah’s grandson Canaan.

The same was true for Israel’s national covenants in Abraham, Moses and David. All the people of Israel were in covenant with God through these covenants, whether they had received eternal salvation or not. For instance, both Jacob and Esau were circumcised and in God’s covenant with Abraham. In Moses’ day every tribe of Israel had both believers and unbelievers within them as they entered into covenant at Mount Sinai. The same was true for God’s dynastic covenant with David. All of David’s descendants and the citizens of Israel were in covenant with God, whether they were true believers or not.

Now we have to be careful when it comes to unbelievers in the new covenant. Old Testament prophecies about the new covenant indicate that it will only include true believers. Listen to the way Jeremiah described the people of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:34:

No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

As this passage reveals, every person counted in the new covenant will know the Lord and be permanently forgiven of their sins. None of their transgressions will ever be counted against them.

Still, as we think about how Jeremiah’s prophecy was fulfilled, we must keep in mind a feature of the new covenant age that we’ve mentioned several times in this series. The New Testament explains that the new covenant in Christ is fulfilled in three stages. It was inaugurated in Christ’s first advent; it continues throughout the history of the church; and it will reach its consummation only when Christ returns in glory.

This unfolding of the new covenant age in three stages helps us understand that, until Christ returns, both believers and unbelievers are counted among God’s people. Both believers and unbelievers were among Christ’s followers during the inauguration of his kingdom. And the same is true throughout the continuation of Christ’s kingdom. The visible Christian church includes true believers who’ve actually received eternal salvation, and unbelievers who receive temporary blessings from their association with Christ and his church.

What is the visible church? It is the church universal, in the sense of the church throughout the world that consists of multiple local churches, multiple denominations, and some churches that don’t think of themselves as denominations at all... That is distinguished in theology from the invisible church. And the invisible church is the church not just that you can see but the church that you can’t see. Hebrews 12, the general assembly of the church of the firstborn,
meaning those who have died and gone to heaven, meaning the elect who are now before the throne of God in the company of angels and archangels that ever was and ever shall be. The invisible church and the visible church make up the church of Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Derek Thomas

Listen to the way the apostle John spoke of unbelievers in the church in 1 John 2:19:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19).

Here the apostle wrote about people who leave the Christian faith. He acknowledged that, in one sense, they were counted as “us.” That is, they lived among the people of God. But John said also that, by leaving the faith, they made it clear that they were “not of us.” That is, they were not true believers. As he said, if they had really been true believers who had received eternal salvation in Christ, “they would have continued with us.” That is, they would have remained faithful to the end.

We all know that the rosters of most churches include people who are true believers and people who are not. Jeremiah’s prophecy of a completely redeemed people of the new covenant will be fulfilled only when Christ returns. At that time, unbelievers among God’s covenant people will suffer the eternal judgment of God. And only true believers will remain to reign with Christ in the new creation.

In addition to the divisions of humanity within divine covenants, the Old Testament record of God’s covenants also addresses the division between those who were included within and those who were excluded from God’s covenants during different periods of history.

**Included and Excluded**

As we’ve already mentioned, all of humanity was included in the universal covenants with Adam and Noah. No groups were excluded from the foundations and natural stability established in these covenants. But this situation changed when God chose Israel as his special covenant people. The national covenants with Abraham, Moses and David primarily included the physical descendants of Abraham and only relatively few Gentiles who were adopted into Israel. For the most part, Gentile nations were excluded from Israel’s national covenants. Listen to Ephesians 2:12 and the way Paul described Gentiles before they became followers of Christ:

You were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).
Gentiles were strangers to the covenants of promise. They were without hope and without God. So, during the centuries of Israel’s national covenants, there were actually three kinds of people in the world: true believers who were in Israel’s covenants, unbelievers who were in Israel’s covenants, and unbelieving Gentiles who were excluded from Israel’s covenants.

This threefold distinction is important because it also holds for the new covenant until Christ returns in glory. As we’ve seen, until that day, true believers are included in the new covenant along with unbelievers who are associated with the visible church. And during the New Testament period, there’s also a third category: men and women who have not acknowledged the gospel or the church. These people are excluded from the new covenant. During Old Testament history those outside of the covenant were primarily Gentiles. But now that Christ has come, those outside of the new covenant include both Jews and Gentiles who have no part in Christ or his church.

The threefold distinction between people in the Old Testament holds for the new covenant as well.

Now that we’ve seen how certain divisions of humanity are related to the people of God’s covenants, we’re ready to turn to the application of covenant dynamics to these groups. How have these categories of people experienced God’s benevolence, the requirement of human loyalty, and consequences of blessings and curses?

**APPLICATION OF DYNAMICS**

All people have experienced the dynamics of the universal covenants in Adam and Noah. The lives of all people have been directly impacted by the foundational policies...
established in Adam and the stability of nature established in Noah. Yet, the same is not true of Israel’s national covenants in Abraham, Moses and David. Nor is it true with the new covenant.

As we consider the application of covenant dynamics to various groups, we need to see how the national covenants and the new covenant applied to three kinds of people: first unbelievers excluded from these covenants; second, unbelievers included in these covenants; and third, true believers included in these covenants. Let’s look first at unbelievers who have been excluded from Israel’s national covenants and from the new covenant.

Unbelievers Excluded

Unbelievers who have no connection to the national covenants and the new covenant are nonetheless bound to God by his universal covenants in Adam and Noah. For this reason, they still experience the dynamics of these covenants. They receive God’s benevolence because God shows kindness to all people. As Jesus put it in Matthew 5:45:

Your Father who is in heaven… makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:45).

We often call these blessings “common grace” because they are not saving mercies. Rather, they are displays of God’s grace to all human beings.

Beyond this, unbelievers outside Israel’s national covenants and the new covenant are still required to give God their loyal service according to the measure of revelation they’ve received. They may have some awareness of the special revelation given to Israel and the church. But even if they’ve never had contact with Israel or the Christian church, they still have a basic understanding of their obligations to God through general or natural revelation.

In Scripture, God tells us — and Paul gives this argument in Romans 1 — that it doesn’t matter who it is or of what culture, every human being who has ever existed has known about the existence of God… Paul said that every man knows that God exists by conscience. Man has a reason, he has a conscience, and through what has been created in the world, God’s divine nature has been clearly seen. So, all men know that God exists.

— Rev. Clete Hux

As Paul put it in Romans 1:20:

[God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).
General revelation has always obligated unbelievers outside the covenants with Israel and the new covenant to acknowledge and serve their Creator.

As a result, these unbelievers also experience the consequences of blessings and curses as God sees fit. God often grants temporary blessings to unbelievers who never join with Israel or the Christian church. And he also pours out temporary curses on them as he determines. But the Scriptures are clear that at the great judgment, God’s temporary blessings and curses in this life will lead to God’s eternal curses for these unbelievers.

Unlike unbelievers excluded from these covenants, the application of covenant dynamics takes place differently with those unbelievers who are included in God’s covenants with Israel and the new covenant.

### Unbelievers Included

To begin with, God has shown much benevolence to these people. True, they have not received eternal salvation, but still, God has shown great kindness to unbelievers who have been joined to God’s covenant people both in the Old and New Testaments. In Romans 9:4, the apostle Paul reflected on the advantages that even unbelievers in Israel enjoyed. He wrote:

To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises (Romans 9:4).

God showed greater kindnesses to unbelievers who were in God’s covenants with Israel than to those outside of these covenants. And the same is true for unbelievers associated with the Christian church.

In the Old Testament, both believers and unbelievers in Israel were physically delivered from slavery in Egypt. They all received the gift of God’s law at Mount Sinai. They all conquered the Land of Promise. They were blessed during the reigns of David and Solomon. And in much the same way, unbelievers in the New Testament church are sanctified by association with the body of Christ. They hear the preaching of the Word. They share in the work of the Holy Spirit. In these and many other ways, God has shown great benevolence to unbelievers in Old Testament Israel and in the New Testament church.

Along with receiving great benevolence from God, unbelievers in Israel’s national covenants and in the new covenant owe God loyal service. They have received greater knowledge of God’s will. So, God has held them to higher standards of obedience. As Jesus put it in Luke 12:48:

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required (Luke 12:48).

Those who learn the truth of God’s Word, those who know his ways, are held accountable to what they have received.

The Scriptures also indicate that unbelievers in Israel’s national covenants and in the new covenant experience the consequences of blessings and curses from God. As God determines, they receive different sorts of temporary blessings and temporary curses in this
life. But unless they come to have saving faith in Christ, on the great day of judgment these blessings and curses will only lead to God’s eternal curses. They will remain under the judgment of God forever. In Hebrews 10:28-29, the writer of Hebrews wrote about the eternal judgment coming against unbelievers in the new covenant:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy … How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:28-29).

Notice here that these people are “sanctified” by “the blood of the covenant.” This does not mean that they had received eternal salvation. Rather, they were set apart from the world as participants in the new covenant. And when these people rebel against God — as they always do to some degree or another — there is only one expectation, namely, God’s eternal judgment, the judgment he has reserved for his enemies.

We’ve considered unbelievers excluded and included in Israel’s national covenants and the new covenant. Now, let’s look at how true believers included in these covenants experience the dynamics of interaction with God.

Believers Included

The divine benevolence shown to true believers is immeasurable, including forgiveness of sins and eternal fellowship with God. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:1-2:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2).

God loves us to the extent that he sent his Son to pay the penalty for our sins, to suffer in our place, and to save us from the condemnation that we have brought on ourselves… So, this should bring great encouragement to us. In fact, Paul picks up on this point in Romans 8 and encourages us with these words: he says, “If God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?” And so, God has definitively and ultimately and climactically shown us the way he loves us in the giving of his Son. We should therefore trust him and be assured that he really does love us.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

At the same time, while we are free from the condemnation of God’s law, we have been called to loyal service to God out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ.
This is why, in Romans 8:7, Paul went on to contrast believers with unbelievers, saying these words:

The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law (Romans 8:7).

By contrast, the mind that loves God submits to his law. So, in Romans 8:12-13, Paul added these words:

So then, brothers, we are … [to] put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:12-13).

Believers have an obligation to live differently from unbelievers. That is, they have an obligation to submit to God’s law — not to earn salvation, but to honor God for the salvation he has given by his grace.

Like Old Testament Israelites, Christians must follow Scripture’s rules and regulations to test and prove their faith. True believers in the Old Testament were called to obey the law of Moses as a test of their faith. Christians in the New Testament are called to the same kind of testing. As Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Christ was the perfectly obedient Son of God, and his righteousness is credited to us so that our eternal salvation is secure. But as we live our daily lives, we are to prove the salvation that God has granted to us. As Paul encouraged the Philippians 2:12:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

As we should expect, true believers in Israel’s national covenants and in the new covenant also experience the consequences of obedience and disobedience in a variety of ways. On the one hand, as God determines in his wisdom, true believers experience temporary blessings. We’re granted many blessings of God’s Spirit. And beyond this, God often grants even physical blessings to his people. But the opposite is true as well. God trains his true children through discipline. In Hebrews 12:6, the writer referred to the Old Testament when he explained it this way:

The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives (Hebrews 12:6).

Despite these mixed experiences of temporary blessings and curses for true believers in this life, there is a crucial difference between unbelievers and believers. When
Christ returns in glory, true believers will only experience the eternal blessings of God. As we read in Revelation 21:7:

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son (Revelation 21:7).

As we continue to study the Old Testament, it’s essential that we always remember these three divisions of humanity and how covenant dynamics apply to them. Remembering the distinctions between unbelievers outside of the national covenants and the new covenant, unbelievers within these covenants, and true believers within these covenants will equip us to understand the Old Testament implications for the ancient Israelites who first read it. And we’ll be better equipped to see how it applies to us today.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we’ve introduced the biblical concept of divine covenants. We’ve seen that God administers his kingdom through covenants. We’ve also looked at biblical history and learned that God’s covenants in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the new covenant stressed the policies of God’s kingdom for different periods of time. In addition, we’ve explored the basic dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses that characterized the interactions between God and his covenant people in every covenant period. And finally, we’ve explored how these dynamics apply to different kinds of people throughout the Scriptures and today.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of divine covenants for understanding the Old Testament. Every biblical author knew that God administered his kingdom through covenants. And as a result, the significance of every teaching on every page of the Old Testament is rooted in the framework of God’s covenants. We serve Christ who has brought the new covenant. And as his followers, we must learn all we can from God’s covenants in the Old Testament so that we may live for him in this age. Renewing our commitments to the policies of divine covenants in the Bible, will lead us to eternal life with Christ in the fullness of his kingdom.
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