

Living in Covenant with God

Lesson One: Introduction to the Covenants

Day 1

As you begin today's study please take a moment to pray that as the Word comes to you that it would bear fruit in you, and that you would increase in the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1: 1-12)

The goal of this week's lesson is to lay a solid foundation that we will build upon over the course of the study. To be prepared for this lesson you will need a bible, dictionary, concordance and/or a computer.

- Look up the word **covenant** in the dictionary. What is the definition?

- Look up the word **covenant** in an exhaustive concordance or using biblestudytools.com (for an explanation of how to use these tools see the resource section of your notebook)
 - What Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament? What is the definition?

 - What Greek word is used in the New Testament? What is the definition?

- Read the article from R.C. Sproul on *Covenants* found in your resource section. How does he describe covenant?

- Look at the biblical passages for reflection in Sproul's article and pick two to read. Make some observations about covenants from these verses.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the following questions and answers. Fill in the blanks, you can find the WSC online if you do not have a copy.

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to _____, and _____ forever.

Q: What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A: The _____, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Let's consider what does the Scripture say about *how* we can glorify and enjoy God.

Read the following quote from the book Covenant Theology by Michael Horton. His writing is academic in nature so do not feel discouraged if you have to read through it several times to get the meaning.

“So what brings all these [biblical] themes together? What unites [all of scripture] is not itself a central dogma but...a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. That particular architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield is the covenant. It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety.”

What is Horton saying?

Simply put, the bible tells us that we glorify God and enjoy him by living in covenant with him.

Understanding what it means to live in covenant with God is foundational to understanding Scripture and our role as a disciple of Christ. This study is dedicated to understanding Covenant theology by taking a close look at the particular covenants that God makes with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ.

Take a moment to write down questions that you would like to discuss with your leaders.

As you begin study please take a moment to pray that as the Word comes to you that it would bear fruit in you and that you would increase in the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:1-12)

The Bible is a historical book and we must study it as such if we want to understand its full meaning. As we think about living in covenant with God, we will gain understanding of Scripture by looking at "extra-biblical" (not in the Bible) covenants of the time. Two types of covenants found in other historical accounts are "Suzerain-vassal treaties" and "Royal Grant Covenants". Read the explanations of each below. As you read, underline or highlight the information that seems most pertinent and particular to each type of treaty.

"Suzerain Treaties & The Covenant Documents the Bible"

In the Ancient Near East, treaties between kings were common. These were treaties drawn up among equals and mostly outlined agreements to honor each other's boundaries, to maintain trade relations, and return run-away slaves. These treaties are preserved in the Mari Tablets and in the Amarna texts. Also preserved in these collections are treaties drafted between a superior and his inferior. If the relationship was familial or friendly, the parties are referred to as "father" and "son." If the relationship is bereft of kindness and intimacy, the parties are referred to as "lord" and "servant," or "king" and "vassal," or "greater king" and "lesser king." The greater king is the suzerain and the lesser king is a prince, or a lesser lord in the service of the greater king. The lesser lord is a representative of all the common people who are under the protection of the greater king. He enforces the treaty among the masses.

These Suzerain/Vassal treaties open with two sections: 1) The identification of the Suzerain by his name and titles; 2) The historical survey of the Suzerain's dealings with the vassal. The purpose is to illustrate to the vassal how much the Suzerain has done to protect and establish the vassal who therefore owes submission and allegiance to the Suzerain. These two sections are referred to as the "Preamble."

The next section of these treaties lists the "stipulations." What the vassal is required to do is spelled out in principal and detail. This section is often concluded with the requirement that the vassal deposit his copy of the treaty in his temple, where he is to occasionally read and study it to refresh his memory concerning his duties.

The last section of these treaties contains the blessings and curses of the Suzerain. If the stipulations are met by the vassal, he will receive the Suzerain's blessings, which are listed. If the vassal fails to meet the stipulations, he will receive the Suzerain's curses, which are also listed.

The Suzerain would keep one copy of the treaty and the vassal would keep one copy of the treaty. A number of ratifying ceremonies were used depending upon the era and culture. But the most widely used rite was that of cutting the bodies of animals in halves and placing them in two rows with enough space between for the two parties of the treaty to walk side by side. As they walked between the pieces, they were vowing to each other, "May what has happened to these animals, happen to me if I break this covenant with you."¹

¹ Notes from lectures of Dr. Meredith Kline

Royal Grant Treaties

In Royal Grant Covenants the king (or suzerain) commits himself to the good of the servant (or vassal)

“1. This type of covenant was usually perpetual with no specific conditions. It was, however, understood that the behavior of the heirs would continue to follow the original recipient's loyal example.

2. Most covenants of this type contained the same kind of blessings and curses found in the Vassal Covenant.”²

Biblical Covenants & Historical Treaty Types

| Suzerain-vassal Treaties | Royal Grant Treaties |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Covenant with Moses | Covenant with Noah |
| Covenant with David | Covenant with Abraham |
| | New Covenant |

Given what you have learned...

- In biblical covenants who is the suzerain/king? What does that mean?
- Who are the vassals/servants? What does that mean?

Let's consider some Biblical examples to put it all together.

- Read Deuteronomy 10:12-22. (A Suzerain-Vassal treaty)
 - How does God describe himself as the suzerain/sovereign? What names and titles does He use?
 - How are God's people described as servants/vassals? How does God describe His dealings with them?
 - What are His requirements for His people/vassals?

² Goundry, 2007

- What blessings and/or curses does He present?

- Read Genesis 9: 8-17 (A Royal Grant Covenant)
 - Does God show himself committed to the good of his servants? How?

 - Are there any specific requirements?

What do you understand to be the difference between a Suzerain-Vassal treaty and a Royal Grant Covenant?

As you think about the people of Israel, describe what life was like under *both* kinds of treaties.

Suzerain-Vassal life...

Royal Grant life....

Remember that our goal is to understand living in covenant with God *so that* we might better understand Scripture and our role as disciples of Christ! Take a moment to summarize what you have learned about covenants today and write down any questions that you would like to discuss with your leader.

As you begin study please take a moment to pray that as the Word comes to you that it would bear fruit in you and that you would increase in the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:1-12)

Yesterday we looked at covenants in a **historical** sense. Today we are going to explore covenants as **relationships**.

Which of the following terms apply to your idea of “relationship”?

parties obligations rules rewards/consequences interaction

Which apply to what you have learned about “covenant”?

parties obligations rules rewards/consequences interaction

To say that God is covenantal is to say that He is relational. We are going to learn about how God relates to His people by looking at the various covenants. As a foundation it is important to note the covenantal/relational nature of God *within Himself*.

- Read Genesis 1:26.
 - What is the pronoun used to describe the Creator? Is it singular or plural?

- Read Malachi 2:10 and Deut 6:4.
 - What do these verses tell us about our God?

One of the great conundrums of our faith is that our God is triune. He is **one** yet exists in three distinct persons. We are not going to explore the Trinity in depth in this study, however it is important to note as we look at the covenantal nature of God. God is relational even within Himself. He ultimately exists in covenant! God chooses to relate to us within a covenant because it is an overflow of His nature.

What about God’s relationship, His covenant, with His people? Read Malachi 2:5-6.

- In these verses the Lord speaks of his covenant with Levi. Reread the passage substituting the word “relationship” for “covenant.” What do you find?

- To consider how broadly this relationship/covenant principle applies, look up the word “covenant” in the concordance in the back of your Bible. Pick two passages that deal with covenant.
 - Read each passage, substituting the word “relationship” for the word “covenant”?
 - Do these verses maintain their meaning with the substitution? Why or why not?

God is in “covenant /relationship” with His people. Each covenant contains three basic elements that define its **character**.

- **Plurality:** covenants made with individuals are meant to be expressed in groups
 - Read Genesis 2:18. How do you see the “plurality” of God’s covenant with Adam?
- **Personality:** God is personally involved with the people He makes covenant with
 - Read Genesis 2:7. How do you see the “personal” nature of God’s covenant with Adam?
- **Purpose:** there is a purpose in each covenant
 - Read Genesis 1:28. How do you see the “purpose” of God’s covenant with Adam?

Remember that our goal is to understand living in covenant with God *so that* we might better understand Scripture and our role as disciples of Christ! In conclusion, take into consideration all that you have learned about covenants thus far and write it down. What questions do you have?

As you begin today's study please take a moment to pray that as the Word comes to you that it would bear fruit in you, and that you would increase in the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:1-12)

Let's look at O.Palmer Robertson's definition of a covenant. According to Robertson, a covenant is:

"a bond in blood sovereignly administered"

- What is a "bond"?
- What does it mean that a bond is "sovereignly administered"?
- What do you think about when you hear the statement "bond in blood?"
- Often when we think about blood we think of something gruesome, but it also reminds us of life. How so?

To say that a bond is "in blood" is to say that it correlates to death (gruesome) *and* life (hopeful).

Read Hebrews 9:15-22.

- What do you learn from this passage about a covenant being a "bond in blood"?
- According to the writer, why is the blood necessary?

Let's explore the **conduct** of biblical covenants and their **signs** and/or **seals**. How do covenants "work"? Good question!

The **conduct** of covenants is evidenced in the following three elements:

1. **Parties:** who is involved

- 2. **Conditions:** the rules to which each party must adhere
- 3. **Consequences:** the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience

Think of a relationship that you have...spouse, parent, roommate, boyfriend, or friend

- Who are the parties?

- What are the conditions? (Rules for interaction/commitments)

- What are some of the consequences? (what will happen if the rules are kept? If they are broken?)

Read the passage below to consider the “conduct” of the God’s covenant with His people.

| | Parties | Conditions | Consequences |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Malachi 2:1-9 | | | |

How is it helpful for you to understand the **conduct** of God’s covenant with His people?

Signs and seals are the **ratification** of covenants.

- Look up “ratification” in a dictionary. What does it mean?

For clarity let’s look at the covenant of marriage.

- Read Mark 10:6-9
 - Is marriage a bond? How so?

- Is this bond “in blood”, remember that this also means a bond in life or death?
- Is it sovereignly administered?
- When a man and women marry, what is the sign and seal of this marriage? (Hint: it is how you distinguish between people who are married and single)
- What is the purpose of this sign and seal?

A wedding ring *identifies* a man or woman with the covenant that they have made, and serves to *remind* them of this bond.

Anytime we see a **sign** and **seal** in biblical covenants, it serves to remind the people of and identify them with a “bond and blood sovereignly administered.”

Take a moment to reflect on what you have learned today and summarize it below.

As you begin today's study please take a moment to pray that as the Word comes to you that it would bear fruit in you, and that you would increase in the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:1-12)

Each week in our study we are going to devote a day to seeing Christ in the Covenant. Each one whispers his name!

- On day one we found that the chief end of man is to _____,
- And that we learn how to do this in the _____.
- Scripture tells us that we glorify and enjoy God by living in _____ with him.

Read John 10:10.

- Why does Christ say that he has come?

Read John 15.

- How do we experience "abundant life" in Christ?
- How does John 15 describe our covenant relationship with Jesus?

What does Christ have to do with us living in covenant with God?

This week we have looked at covenants as if from the window of an airplane, from 20,000 feet. If things look blurry, do not be discouraged! Houses look blurry from this distance, but the details become much clearer when you observe them "up close and personal", inside and out. In the following weeks we are going to get a closer look!

Let's spend a few minutes reviewing what we have learned.

- What is a covenant?

- Why is it important to understand covenants?
- What do we learn from Suzerain-Vassal treaties and Royal Grants about covenants?
- How are the terms “covenant” and “relationship” interchangeable?
- Describe the elements of the character of a covenant?
- Describe the elements of the conduct of a covenant?
- What is O. Palmer Robertson’s definition of covenant?

Reflect on this week’s lesson.

- What have you learned about God?
- What have you learned about yourself?
- What questions do you have to discuss during your small group?