

THE OLD COVENANT AND THE NEW COVENANT

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Life is filled with “agreements” or “covenants”. Before signing an agreement, or entering into a covenant, it is wise to understand the nature of that covenant. Human judges render verdicts every day based upon what participating parties agree by “covenant” to do. God has also written a covenant and will someday render His eternal verdict based upon His covenant. Nothing is more important than understanding the nature of our covenant relationship with God.

Let us begin our study by pointing out that in the Bible the words “covenant” and “testament” are used interchangeably. The Hebrew word for “covenant” is “berith”. The word “testament” is not found in the Old Testament Scriptures. In the New Testament Scriptures the Greek word “diatheke” is used to translate “berith”. In the KJV it is translated as both testament and covenant (“testament” in 2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Heb. 7:22; 9:15 - 20, etc. and “covenant:” in Heb. 8:6 - 13; 9:1, 4; 10:16 etc.)

There are many covenants mentioned in the Bible. For example, there are seven different covenants mentioned in the book of Genesis. They are the:

1. Covenant with Noah regarding the ark (Gen. 6:18).
2. Covenant with Noah and every living creature regarding future floods (Gen. 9:9 - 17).
3. Covenant with Abram concerning the Promised Land (Gen. 15:18).
4. Covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:1 - 21).
5. Covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:17 - 32).
6. Covenant between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:28).
7. Covenant between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44 - 45).

When the Bible talks about the “Old Covenant”, however, it is not referring to any of these!

THE OLD TESTAMENT (COVENANT)

It is a common practice today to refer to the first 39 books of the Bible as the Old Testament (or covenant) and the last 27 books of the Bible as the New Testament (or covenant). This is not true! Since understanding the nature of our covenant with God is so critical, let us focus our mental and spiritual energies on this important subject. Let us begin by observing that the Old Covenant, in the language of Scripture, was the Ten Commandments and not the first 39 books of the Bible. Please consider:

- Not one verse of Scripture ever refers to the first 39 books of the Bible as a Testament.
- The Old Testament was made when God took His people by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt (Heb. 8:9). The Hebrew Scriptures, however, were written later.
- God made the Old Covenant with His people in Horeb (Deut. 5:2) or in the language of Galatians 4:25, “Mt. Sinai in Arabia”. The first 39 books of the Bible, however, were written in Palestine, Babylon, and Persia.
- The Old Testament was broken by the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:32). Some books of the Hebrew Bible, however, were not yet written at this time.
- The Scriptures state explicitly that Moses received a covenant while he was 40 days upon Mt. Sinai. This covenant (also called the Ten Commandments) was written on two

tablets of stone and placed in a receptacle called the “Ark of the Covenant” (Nu. 10:33). Once this covenant was completed God “added nothing more” - Deut. 5:22. (See also Exodus 34:27 - 28; Deuteronomy 4:11 - 13; 5:1 - 3; 9:11, etc.)

- While there are many covenants mentioned in the Bible, the Old Covenant, (or Testament) as mentioned in Hebrew 8:6-13, was in fact the Ten Commandments and not the first 39 books of the Bible.

The Old Testament was written on stone. It was cold, rigid, and inflexible. When a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day, for example, it was “not clear what should be done to him” (Nu. 15:34). In this instance they prayed to God for guidance and the Lord said to Moses that the man must die. Under the Old Covenant lawbreakers died “without mercy” (Deut. 18:8; 19:13; Heb. 10:28 etc.)

The Hebrew Scriptures are inspired and were written to a covenant people, but these 39 books of the Bible are not the Old Covenant! They never have been and never will be!

THE NEW TESTAMENT (COVENANT)

The Scriptures teach that God found fault with the Old Covenant and decided to write a new one (Heb. 8:7, 8). The New Covenant, however, would be totally different and distinct from the old. Like new wine and old skins the two cannot be combined. The revolutionary New Covenant is not cold, rigid, and inflexible for it is written in the hearts and minds of believers (See Heb. 8:6 - 13).

Please consider:

- Not once are the last 27 books of the Bible ever called the New Testament or Covenant.
- The Christian Scriptures were written with paper and ink (2 John 12, 3 John 13). The New Testament, however, is not written with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God (2 Cor. 3:3).
- The New Testament became an immediate reality on the first Pentecost after our Lord’s resurrection. Thousands were saved and became covenant people on that day, yet the New Testament Scriptures were not written for many years.
- The New Testament Scriptures came gradually as God guided inspired men into all truth. The canon of New Testament Scripture was not completed until near the end of the first century, and was not generally accepted until the fourth century. Many Christians died as martyrs before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was written.
- The Old Testament was written on tablets of stone. It was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy. 3,000 died when the Old Testament was given (Ex. 32:28). The New Testament is written upon the fleshly tables of the heart and mind (2 Cor. 3:3, Heb. 8:8 - 10). It was given by a merciful and faithful High Priest (Heb. 2:17). 3,000 were saved when the New Testament was given (Acts 2:41).
- The Old Testament was in the Holy of Holies in the temple. The New Testament transforms our bodies into temples of the Living God (1 Cor. 6:19). Just as the glory of God was associated with the Ten Commandments, so also we are to glorify God in our bodies.

NOTE THESE DIFFERENCES

- Under the Old Covenant, little children and aliens had no knowledge of God and had to be taught (Deut. 6:7). New Covenant people do not have to be taught. From the least to the greatest they already know God (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:11).
- The Old Covenant was in a box (Deut. 10:5; Nu. 10:33), but the New Covenant is in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19).
- Old Testament worship was confined to a “place” (Deut. 12:5). New Testament worship is in spirit and in truth and can happen anywhere (Jn. 4:23).
- The Old Covenant was administered by priests “without pity” (Deut. 13:8). The New Covenant is administered by a priest that is both faithful and merciful (Heb. 2:17).
- As we have said before, when the Old Testament became a reality 3,000 died (Ex. 32:28), and when the New Testament became a reality 3,000 were saved (Acts 2:41).
- The Old Testament priesthood came from the tribe of Levi. The New Testament priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek has a superior priesthood (Heb. 8:6).
- The Old Testament high priest ministered on earth in a tabernacle made by man. The New Testament high priest ministers in heaven in the true tabernacle made by God (Heb. 8:2).
- Old Testament priests were prevented by death from continuing their service, but Jesus, our Great High Priest, ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).
- It was God who found something wrong with the Old Covenant and decided to write a New Covenant (Heb. 8:7).

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Ishmael and Isaac are used in Scripture to help us understand the dramatic difference between these two covenants. These two sons of Abraham, and their mothers, are said to be an “allegory” of the two covenants (Gal. 4:24). The Greek word translated as allegory is “allegoreo”. “Allos” means “other”, and “agoreuo” means to speak in an assembly. An allegory is a teaching tool that describes one thing under the image of another. By understanding the difference between Ishmael and Isaac we gain insight into the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Ishmael and the Old Covenant represent slavery. Isaac and the New Covenant represent freedom (Gal. 4:25, 26).

Ishmael and Isaac were half brothers. They had the same father, but different mothers. They were similar in many ways. Abraham begat both in his old age. God spoke to both mothers and prophesied about the future of both sons. Both sons were circumcised. Both became great nations. Both lived in the same part of the world. Both helped bury their father. Since both had the same father, it is quite possible that they were similar in appearance. We may also assume that both wore the same type of clothing, ate the same type of food, and had the same life style. If we saw them from a distance we might easily confuse one with the other.

These brothers may have seemed alike but they were radically different. The word “radical” comes from the Latin “radix,” which means, “root.” (This is the basis of our English word “radish,” which is a root.) So these brothers were radically different, like slavery and freedom.

Judaism and Christianity are also similar in many superficial ways. In Corinth, for example, the Christians met in a house next door to the Jewish synagogue (Acts 18:7). The two buildings may have been quite similar. Both of these congregations were involved in similar activities. Both met each week and studied the Scriptures. Both were evangelistic. Both baptized their converts by immersion. Both sang psalms. Both had nothing to do with pagan idols. Both had high standards of moral conduct. Both emphasized the importance of prayer. Both had elders and deacons. When seen from a distance, one might easily confuse one with the other.

These two groups, however, like Ishmael and Isaac, were radically different. The Jewish synagogue was based upon the Old Covenant, that is, the Ten Commandments. As the Old Covenant was to be administered without mercy, the synagogue gave punishment without mercy. It was not at all uncommon for people to be physically beaten in the synagogue (Matt. 10:17; Mk. 13:9; Acts 26:11, etc.)

While the Christians were filled with joy the Jews were filled with fear. They were so afraid of taking the name of God in vain that they would not even try to pronounce His name. Moreover, the actual meaning of all the Ten Commandments was also a constant source of controversy. Take, for example, the commandment to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. We have already mentioned the case of the man caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. When it was “not clear” what to do with him God intervened and commanded that he be stoned to death (Nu. 15:35). Notice that it was “not clear” until God rendered judgement. Over the years there have been thousands, and perhaps even millions, of controversial cases in which the Lord did not intervene, or explain what to do. Thus the synagogue became a place where these controversial points of law were debated.

For example, the Law states that the Sabbath Day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. This sounds simple, but it is not. For example, what is work? Some say that to carry a burden on the Sabbath Day is work. But this only raises another question, what is a burden? Scribal Law defined a burden as “food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen”—and so on. So the rabbis spent endless hours debating the meaning of the Old Covenant and the people were never quite certain which rabbi to follow. Simple procedures like moving a lamp, stitching a garment, wearing a wig, putting in false teeth, lifting a child, became the focal point of debate, controversy, and division.

Thus the Old Covenant is controversial, like Ishmael. Before he was born the angel of the Lord said to his mother: “You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers.” (Gen 16:11-12)

The name “Ishmael” means “God hears”. There are at least two reasons why this name is appropriate. First, the Lord “heard” the cries of Hagar’s misery. Second, Ishmael kept crying out to God about the loss of his inheritance and thus was in constant hostility with all his brothers.

A brief review of Ishmael's life will help to understand his combative nature. For almost fourteen years he had every reason to believe he would inherit the wealth of his father. During this time, he was not only the firstborn son of Abram, he was the only son. He was also much loved by his father. Note that when Abraham was informed that Sarah would have a son, he cried out to God: "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (Gen. 17:18.) Such, however, was not to be.

When Isaac was born, an incredible thing happened. Ishmael, the firstborn and beloved son of Abraham, was driven out and disinherited. The Scriptures are clear in this regard: "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac" (Gen 25:5). No wonder Ishmael was angry. He must have "cried out" to God in his misery, just as his mother had cried out in her misery so many years before. This is, of course, an allegory that helps us to understand the nature of law. The very essence of law is litigious and quarrelsome, just like Ishmael. That which is written in stone never changes. Our understanding, however, does change. Consequently, our understanding of law is in a constant state of flux. Human beings are seldom at the same level of knowledge and understanding. Sometimes we even learn new information that requires us to abandon previous positions about which we once felt confident. This is one reason why the Old Covenant, written in stone, will always be controversial.

SARAH AND ISAAC

Sarah and Isaac are much different and are an allegory of the New Covenant. Let us briefly review their story. Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God appeared again to Abram and renewed His promises. This time the promises were given in association with the covenant of circumcision, and the changing of names. Abram (exalted father) was given the name Abraham (father of multitudes.) Sarai (Jehovah is Prince) was given the name Sarah (princess.) The very essence of Isaac's birth involved the supernatural. From the human point of view Sarah couldn't have a baby. It had ceased to be with her after the manner of women (Gen. 18:11.) She was "past age" (Heb. 11:11.) She had a dead womb (Rom. 4:19.) She had wanted to have a baby all of her married life, and had failed. The very idea that she could conceive, after menopause, was preposterous. This idea, as you know, did not come from man, it came from God.

The name Isaac means "laughter." Abraham laughed at the idea of his birth (Gen. 17:17), and so did Sarah (Gen. 18:12). Isaac also must have laughed when he inherited everything Ishmael had hoped for. As we have already pointed out, when Abraham died he left everything he owned to Isaac (Gen. 25:5.) The son of the bondwoman was not an heir with the son of the freewoman (Gal. 4:30.) This, as you know, is like Christianity. Our inheritance is like that of Isaac. It is both miraculous, and undeserved.

While Ishmael was arguing and complaining, Isaac was laughing. This is indeed a poignant allegory of the two covenants.

THE NEW BIRTH AND THE NEW COVENANT

On the third day God created living things that reproduced by means of seeds (Gen. 1:11). Each seed reproduced after its own kind. Apple seeds produced apple trees, pear seeds produced pear trees, etc. Even human life comes from seeds. It is both interesting and

significant to note that the first time Jesus is mentioned in Scripture He is described as the “seed” of woman (Gen. 3:15). Every seed has a specific genetic code that produces a specific form of life. That’s why Jesus said to Nicodemus that he had to be born again (John 3:1 - 8). Flesh gives birth to flesh and spirit give birth to spirit (John 3:6). If Nicodemus wanted spiritual life he had to receive it from a spiritual seed. So do we! It is not an option, if we want to enter into the Kingdom of God, we MUST be born again. Our physical birth came from a physical seed that contained the “deoxyribonucleic acid” or DNA of our parents. Our spiritual birth gives us the DNA of our Spiritual Father. Our physical bodies will die, but spiritually we can live forever.

Peter reminded his readers that Christians are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” (1 Pet 1:23) This spiritual seed places God’s nature within us. Just as a physical seed gave us the “image” of our earthly father, conversion gives us the “image” of our Heavenly Father (1 Cor. 15:49). The Kingdom of God is spiritual, that’s why it cannot be inherited by flesh and blood. Even though the product of being born is spiritual, it is very real. In fact, Christians are even called “new creations” in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17).

If God has written His laws in your minds and hearts the transformation of your life will be obvious. Here are some of the ways the Apostle John describes those who are “born again”.

- **“If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (I Jn 2:29).**
- **“No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (I Jn 3:9).**
- **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” (I Jn 4:7).**
- **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well” (I Jn 5:1).**
- **“for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (I Jn 5:4).**
- **“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him” (I Jn 5:18).**

FATHERHOOD AND BROTHERHOOD

Something is obviously wrong in the brotherhood! Jesus prayed that we would be “one” but we are not (Jn. 17:21). There are literally hundreds of divisions in the Family of God. Incredibly, it seems that the brethren who study the Bible the most are often the most divided. Perhaps one reason for this division is a basic misunderstanding of the New Covenant. As we have said before, the New Covenant is not the last 27 books of the Bible. Again, we must emphasize that the Bible is inspired by God, and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, but it is not the covenant.

Please consider:

- The Jerusalem church was united in Christ before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was even written.
- Christian brethren had unity even though the canon of Scripture was not completed until the end of the first century and not accepted until the fourth century.

- Even after the invention of the printing press the majority of believers in the world today still do not have a Bible and millions do not even have a written language. This, however, does not keep us from being united in Christ.
- The majority of people who have Bibles have not read them. If you do not believe this I challenge you to check at your own church and see how many have ever read the entire Bible.
- The majority of people who have read the whole Bible have not studied the whole Bible. Those who study the Bible are invariably guided by the preconceptions and prejudices of their own religious fellowship. Two brethren, for example, told me they had come to identically the same view of the “millennium” and the “rapture” simply by studying the Bible. This is quite remarkable, as the words “millennium” and “rapture” are not even found in the Bible.
- These and other considerations make it impossible for all of the brethren to understand all of the Bible in identically the same way.
- The Corinthians were divided because their unity was in men like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. The only true foundation for Christian unity is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).

Paul faced death with confidence because he knew “Whom” he had believed (1Tim. 1:12). Our faith is “personal” not “propositional”. “Whom” we believe is far more important than “what” we believe. We can be wrong about a lot of things as long as we are right about Jesus. If we are wrong about Jesus it doesn’t matter what else we are right about!

If you are “born again” with seed from our Heavenly Father you are in the same family as Jesus. Even though we are inferior to Jesus in every way He is not ashamed to call us brethren, because we have a common Father. This is specifically stated in Heb. 2:11.

THESE TRUTHS CAN IMPACT YOUR LIFE AND MINISTRY

As we have said before, believers are to “test everything” (1 Thess. 5:21). This brief study has left many questions unanswered and raised issues that are yet to be resolved. The serious student will not avoid these questions and will pray to God for wisdom in finding answers. They will test everything, just as they are commanded to do. It is important to remember, however, that we are not saved by knowledge, but by faith. Just because someone is ignorant or uninformed on some point of Biblical teaching does not necessarily imply that they are not Christians.

1 Thess. 5:22 commands us to avoid every kind of evil. What does this mean? A five year old child will not have the same understanding of these inspired words as his fifteen year old brother. This doctrinal discrepancy does not mean that the two boys are not brothers and certainly should not be the basis for division. The boys are brothers because they have a common father. Fraternity is based upon paternity.

So also in the religious world we have brothers who are at different levels of wisdom and maturity. The only way they can have identically the same view on every point of Bible doctrine is by turning off their minds and blindly accepting a creed written by someone else. This is obviously wrong and is the very basis of denominationalism. True unity is not in Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, but in Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).

The congregation at Corinth had many problems. In fact, they seem to have been plagued with more problems than any other church mentioned in the Bible. They were divided, they tolerated fornication, they had serious problems over a wide variety of important issues. They needed teaching on marriage, idolatry, the Lord's Supper, the work of women, spiritual gifts, and even the resurrection. Their most pressing need, however, was not more knowledge, but more love. As you know, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

“But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (1 Cor 12:31-13:8)