

Covenants

What is a Covenant?

Covenant is an important idea in the Bible. It is referenced 300 times in Scripture. We usually point (depending on how you count them) to seven covenants in Scripture. At the end of this article a table of these covenants are presented.

Covenant of Adam – Gen 2 (Hosea 6:7)
Covenant of Noah – Gen 6
Covenant of Abraham – Gen 17
Covenant of Moses Ex 19
Covenant of Phinehas - Num 25
Covenant of David – 2 Sam 7
Covenant of Christ – Mat 26:26

There are a number of ways that people define covenants. Some will call it a form of a contract, but that is not entirely accurate. Others will call it a law, but that too does not fully explain what it is. A covenant is the merger between aspects of criminal coded law (i.e. penalty) and aspects of the contractual law (i.e. rewards for performance). In simplest terms, a covenant is a law and a promise (even in our legal system, a contract is sometimes called a promise and performance). This is why the covenants of Scripture are often called Law and called Promises. Within a covenant, a law is a command or rule with a penalty for breaking; this can be found defined in Hebrews 10:16. A promise is a contract or reward for the right completion; this definition can be found in Hebrews 8:6.

Covenants are referred to as Law

*Hosea 8:1 "Set the trumpet to your mouth! He shall come like an eagle against the house of the LORD, because they have transgressed My covenant And rebelled against My law
Psalm 78:10 They did not keep the covenant of God; They refused to walk in His law*

Covenants are referred to as Promises

*Ephesians 2:12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.
Hebrews 8:6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises*

Covenants are Laws and Promises

Romans 9:4 who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises;

Covenants cannot be added to or annulled once created

Galatians 3:15 Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it.

Covenants are for life, and can only be replaced by death

Hebrews 9:16 For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it.

Covenants (because they are for life) are called eternal, everlasting or perpetual by their nature

NOAH: Genesis 9:12 – perpetual covenant
ABRAHAM: Genesis 17:7 – everlasting covenant
MOSES: Exodus 31:16 – perpetual covenant
PHINEHAS: Numbers 25:13 – perpetual covenant
DAVID: 2 Samuel 23:5 – everlasting covenant

In Romans 7 Paul points to the covenant of marriage as an example of the nature of a covenant (Malachi 2:14, Matthew 19). Marriage has a law, commands which must be kept or face judgment (consider the rules of marriage found in I

Corinthians 7:1-56, Ephesians 5:22-33 & I Peter 3:1-7). As a covenant, marriage is meant to be permanent/for life, it is therefore ended at death, and if we violate our marital covenant there are penalties. As well, we cannot enter into multiple covenants.

We can now see the point of Romans 7:1-6. If a covenant is in place as long as the creator of the covenant lives, a new covenant cannot be entered. Mankind had broken the terms of the first covenant, and the covenant of Moses is symbolic of that first covenant. Only by the death of the creator of that first covenant could a new Covenant be instituted. This is why the "purchase price" of a new covenant was blood (Mat. 26:26-28).

Romans 7:1-4 Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

Covenant of Christ

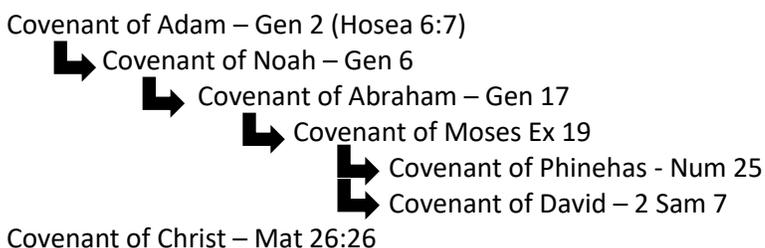
Seeing that there have been multiple covenants in the past, we find only one in the New Testament, the Covenant of Christ, which is meant to replace all previous covenants. In truth, the covenant of Christ replaces the covenant of Adam, and all of the covenants from Adam until Christ were subsequent to that first Adamic covenant. This meant that the covenants after Adam and before Christ did not replace Adam's covenant, but were under that covenant's Law and Promise. We find this in Galatians 3:17:

Galatians 3:17 What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.

Here Paul is saying that previous covenants are not invalidated by subsequent ones. If you consider the nature of the old covenants, you would notice that each one was made with the descendants of one man in mind. Adam (as Mankind) was to all men; Noah too would be all men, but uniquely his descendants; Abram was (partially) his descendants; the covenant of Israel was only the descendants of Jacob; the covenant of David was only his sons; the covenant of Phinehas was only his sons. Yet each of these covenants fall under the authority of the first. Thus none of them were truly new covenants, and none of them could restore what was lost in the first covenant (eternal life). As well, in a fashion, each of the subsequent covenants pointed to Christ as the solution to the covenant crisis which specifically was the fall of man with Adam, but generally speaking was revealed in the covenant of Moses as the problem of sin:

Romans 8:3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,

The nature of covenants is that they look like this, with each preceding covenant SUBSEQUENT in authority to the previous:



None of the covenants from Adam to Moses (which include the High Priest Covenant of Phinehas and the King Covenant of David) overwrote the preceding; none of them had better promises than the first covenant of Adam, which was eternal life. Indeed, each of the subsequent covenants pointed to Christ; the blood of the covenant of Noah, the blessing of the covenant of Abraham, the Prophet of the Covenant of Moses, the High Priest of the covenant of Phinehas, and the King of the covenant of David. It was only the covenant of Christ that was a genuinely NEW covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31 "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,

In Romans 8:3 Paul uses law to (contextually) refer to the covenant of Moses as a whole; that (Mosaic) covenant's purpose was in part to reveal the real issue with all covenants before Christ: the absence of a solution for sin.

Romans 7:13 Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.

The promise of the first covenant was eternal life, and was lost to all by constant. This is what Jesus sought to accomplish, to reverse THAT covenant; in doing so He necessarily fulfilled all subsequent covenants. This is why He is contrasted to Adam:

1 Corinthians 15:45 And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Romans 5:14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

Looking at the nature of covenants, the end of covenants, and the creation of covenants, we can discern a great deal about the purpose of our Lord's coming and His death. If you notice, none of the covenant promises after Adam are as significant as the covenant promise of Adam. This is why the Hebrew writer makes the case that Christ's covenant is superior to all.

Refuting False Ideas

There are a number of false doctrines that can be refuted by understanding the nature of covenants. Claims made by some (in italics) are contrary to the nature of a covenant in general, and refuted by points in parenthesis.

Refutes false doctrines on OT practices

Israel is still a peculiar nation to God (preceding covenants are necessarily done away by Christ)

Keeping the Ten Commandments (the law of a preceding covenant)

Refutes false doctrines on salvation

Eternal security (covenants can be broken)

"saved by faith only" (covenants have obligations)

No law in Christ, only grace (covenants are defined as a law and a promise)

Refutes false doctrines on the identity of Jesus

Jesus was not God (only by the death of God could a new covenant commence)

Refutes false doctrines on divorce & remarriage

That another law exists for non-Christians (there is only one covenant and law today – Christ's)

That we can enter a new marriage covenant (covenants are in place until death)

Refutes false doctrines on modern revelations

A new law, gospel or plan (covenants, once ratified, cannot be annulled or replaced)

Covenant Party	Law/ Command	Promise/ Reward	What Ended It
ADAM Genesis 2:16	Do not eat of the tree	Eternal life in paradise	Romans 7:4
NOAH Genesis 6:18	Build the ark	Preservation and promise	Romans 7:4
ABRAHAM Genesis 17:2	Leave home, Sacrifice	Land Promise Seed Promise	Romans 7:4
MOSES Exodus 19:5	Law of Moses	Promised Land	Romans 7:4
CHRIST Hebrews 8:6-8	Law of Christ	Eternal life in paradise	I Corinthians 15:24