



COVENANT

2016

Introduction

God wants a friendship with us. This friendship is expressed as a Covenant relationship. On the one side God promised to strengthen, guide and sustain us. In return God requires our obedience. This study examines three of the Biblical records of the Covenant story. It begins with God's Covenant with Abraham, and continues through with the story of Moses and concludes with Jesus. God's people failed repeatedly to adhere to the old Covenant – to the point where this Covenant no longer existed. The Prophet Jeremiah then points to a time when God would re-establish the Covenant. Our final study introduces our Christian belief that Jesus came to initiate a New Covenant. This series is intended as preparation for the annual Methodist Covenant Service. We trust that these three weeks will lead you to discover your own Covenant Relationship with God.

Shalom

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Sunday 17 January - Abraham: Hope for the Future

Genesis 12: 1-5

This is the most important moment in the story of Abram (renamed Abraham in Genesis 17). It speaks of a journey born out of faith. All other events in Abram's life would not have taken place if it were not for the obedience Abram showed in vs4. Abram is the pioneer and founder of faith journeys. If there is one very distinct thing about the Bible it is that it is a book of faith journeys undertaken by many people over a long period of time. For reflection and discussion: *Can you tell of a moment when your faithful response to God changed the direction of your life's journey?*

Genesis 12: 6-9

There are places in South Africa that begs the question "why did someone land up here"? Places like Grobblershoop, or Delportshoop, makes us wonder what made people decide to settle there and designate that barren world a place of hope. Surely people could have found a more fertile, more scenic, and more hospitable place to live? Similarly we question the journey of Abram and ask if he could not have done better and found a place to settle nearer home. The truth is that life has a way of taking us on strange unpredictable journeys, whether we like it or not. For reflection and discussion: *Give an instance in your life's journey that took you in a direction you had not planned.*

Genesis 15: 1-6

The important thing about Abram is that his journey is a Covenant journey. This is a journey born out of a relationship with God. This is a journey that will become a blessing not only to Abram but to his descendants who will follow. **See also Genesis 12 vs 2.** Notice that the promise in God's Covenant is that the journey will be a blessing – but it may not be easy,

quick or comfortable. For reflection and discussion: *Give an instance when you were angry at the direction your life took, but which later proved a blessing.*

Genesis 17: 1-8

Abram has his name changed - to Abraham - from “exalted father” to “father of many”. This speaks of the leadership role assigned to him by God. As he has proved willing to step out in faith, and as he was willing to travel to uncomfortable places, so he proved to be righteous (Genesis 15:6). God now gives him a greater responsibility – that of the patriarch of a nation. For reflection and discussion: *How well am I doing in being a father, mother, leader to those who have less faith experience in life than me?*

Conclusion:

Life demands that we make journeys. There is no way out of this. Sometimes we are tempted to take a short cut that avoids the pain and struggle the journey demands. When we are hurt or guilty, we try to avoid the wounds and sin inside of ourselves. In our hurry to get where we want, we are tempted to take a short cut past the pain. These short cuts include avenues such as avoiding thinking of the pain, ignoring the person who causes the pain, pretending that sin does not matter, or rationalizing the sin away. Let us make sure that our journey is a Covenant journey born in faith out of our relationship with God. For reflection: *Is there an area in my life where I am taking a “short cut” and avoiding the journey of the soul that leads to healing?*

The Christian church is called to be a community of people on many different journeys supporting and helping each other. We are hundreds of little Abrahams setting out from Haran – wherever that may be for you – journeying to where God wants you to be. These are not always easy, not quick, sometimes painful, or even grinding to a halt. But may they always be journeys that persist and become a blessing, a sign of God’s presence amongst us.

Sunday 24 January - Moses: Hope for the oppressed

Exodus 19: 1-20: 21

The Covenant with Moses and the children of Israel takes place when the children of Israel escape the life as slaves of the Egyptians. God calls Moses, and God liberates his people from bondage. They cross the Red Sea on dry ground. They receive food from the sky and water from the rock. And in three months they arrive at Mount Sinai. Here God makes a solemn covenant with Israel to confirm and undergird the covenant he made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Try to place yourself in the shoes of the Israelites. They quickly went from being the slaves of one of the most powerful nations on earth to being set free, and having to live without anyone giving them commands. This is difficult for people who have never taken responsibility for their own lives. For this reason, they are given a set of “life-commandments”. **Read Exodus 20: 1-17.** Here certain behavioral requirements are made on Israel. Virtually all of **Exodus 19–34** is concerned with how they should live. Although,

the Commandments made demands and placed restrictions on the Israelites, they never saw the Sinai Covenant as burdensome. The Ten Commandments were rehearsed at all the great religious festivals and were seen as a sign of God's blessing and indeed as an integral part of God's revelation of himself. For reflection and discussion:

1. *How do you feel about rules and regulations?*
2. *Are there situations in which you will respond better to the imposition of rules and regulations than in other situations? What makes the difference?*

It was their distinctive moral character that set the people of God apart and gave them their identity as God's people. The Commandments gave the children of Israel principles by which to live that were life affirming and freed them from the moral decay and degradation that was so much part of their world.

The Commandments also reveal the nature and expectations of the One who created humankind. Since the beginning of time, God has dreamed of the way people should relate to the One who made us – and of the way we should relate to each other. The desire of God is clearly revealed in the Ten Commandments. For reflection and discussion:

1. *What do the Ten Commandments reveal to us about God?*
2. *In what ways do you think God's commandments bring life and blessing rather than being restrictive?*

The Covenant that God established with Moses and the Children of Israel was not intended only for a particular time and space in history. These provide a life-affirming framework of life that transcends history. For this reason many legal systems throughout the world show resonance with the Ten Commandments. And for this reason we draw on them today for our own lives. For reflection and discussion:

1. *Israel's distinctive moral character was a sign that she was the elect of God? What distinctive characteristics should be evident in the Christian community today?*
2. *Are there things about the new South Africa and our nation's future that worry you? Reflect on these, and if possible Share these with a group of Christ-followers so that you can pray together for our land.*

Sunday 31 January - Jesus: Hope for a new beginning

We have reflected on the Covenant relationship between God and humanity. Sadly while God was faithful to His people: the people seemed unable to remain within the Covenant. Many prophets were sent by God to note this point. **Read: Isaiah 65: 1-3a, Jeremiah 11: 6-8a.**

The amazing thing about God is that God has never abandoned the human race. Instead, as the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, God chose to begin the Covenant relationship again. **Read: Jeremiah 31: 31-34.** Jeremiah 31 defines this Covenant. **Jeremiah 31:31** "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah".

God chose to remain faithful to human beings. And God sent Jesus to initiate a new Covenant relationship. This is no longer a covenant based on knowledge of the law: **Read Romans 2:17 – 24, Romans 3: 19-20.** Instead the new Covenant is a relationship based on a willingness to get to know God through faith in Jesus.

The early church father Augustine of Hippo gives this pastoral advice, *“Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt.”* Or put in more modern language: *“Love God and do what you please.”* The answer is shocking at first. It sounds like a way to avoid responsibility and a license to sin. But if we truly love God, then we will want to do the will of God. This is the discovery that our obedience to God comes as a response to the loving Grace of God. For reflection and discussion:

1. *What is the difference between the old Covenant and the new Covenant?*
2. *Does the new Covenant mean that we no longer need to keep the laws of the old Covenant? See Matthew 5:17.*
3. *How do we decide what laws are still relevant, and what laws to ignore? Read Matthew 22:36-40 & John 13:34-38.*

Our Covenant Prayer

Lord God, Holy Father, since You have called us through Christ to share in this gracious Covenant, we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience and, for love of You, engage ourselves to seek and do Your perfect will. We are no longer our own but Yours.

I am no longer my own, but Yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom You will;

Put me to doing, put me to suffering;

Let me be employed for You or laid aside for You;

Exalted for You or brought low for You;

Let me be full, let me be empty;

Let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

You are mine and I am Yours. So be it.

And the Covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.