

THE PROMISE OF JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (1)

The aim of this session is to introduce the course and provide a chronological overview to the Bible story beginning with Creation to humanity's rebellion from Eden (Genesis 3) to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

INTRODUCTION

The Bible:

- Is a collection or **library of books** written over a 2000-year period.
- Was written by over 40 different human authors, mostly in Hebrew and Greek, in **many different styles** e.g. history, poetry, wisdom sayings, parables, prophecies, etc.
- Is **one book** because **God is the ultimate author** that stands behind all the human authors (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- Can only be properly **understood in light of the Lord Jesus Christ** (Luke 24:27; 2 Corinthians 1:20).
- **Tells the one story about God's plan to redeem a fallen world** from Creation to New Creation through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9-11).

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

To better understand the Bible, we need to:

- **Understand the historical sweep** of God's plan of redemption i.e. a chronological overview of the main storyline of the Bible; and
- **Understand the literary forms** that God's divine plan comes to us i.e. a study of the main genres of writing used in communicating that divine plan.

Part A: Main Storyline of the Bible in 4 Parts

- Part 1: From Creation to Rebellion
- Part 2: From Nomads to the Nation of Israel
- Part 3: From Kingdom to Exile and Restoration
- Part 4: From Messiah to the New Jerusalem

Part B: Understanding Major Literary Forms

- New Testament Letters
- Old Testament narratives
- Old Testament prophecies

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

Why covenant as the main theme?

The story-line of Scripture itself unfolds along the lines of God's covenant with his people. (For example, Paul used the phrase 'the covenants of the promise' in Ephesians 2:12.)

Scripture repeatedly speaks about God entering into covenantal relationships with particular individuals i.e. Adam (cf. Hosea 6:7), Noah (Genesis 6:18), Abraham (Genesis 15:18), Israel (Exodus 24:8), and David (Psalm 89:3, cf. 2 Samuel 7).

The prophets look forward to a time where God will establish a 'new covenant' with his people (Jeremiah 31:31), which Christ himself fulfilled (Luke 22:20; Acts 3:25; Ephesians 2:12; Hebrews 8:6, 8:10). 'Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant' (Hebrews 12:24).

From this perspective, the Bible can be seen as a story of God making covenants and man responding to them.

The Mosaic Law, for example, makes explicit what God expects of his covenant people. The historical books show us man's actual response. The wisdom books articulate the wonder and difficulties of living as God's covenantal people while the prophets call the people back into a covenantal relationship with God.

Finally, the New Testament unveils the new covenant centred on Jesus Christ and how it applies to believers and its impact on world history.

Note:

The popular main theme in recent publications is kingdom of God. (*God's Big Picture* takes this approach.) Unlike the word 'covenant' - which appears 286 times in the Old Testament - the phrase 'kingdom of god' does not appear at all.

Nevertheless kingdom is also an important theme. The two are closely related. One can describe the covenant as a kingdom instrument. Or as Williams (2005:56) puts it, 'God maintains and administers the kingdom - his sovereign rule over all creation - through covenant means.'

What is a covenant?

A covenant can be defined 'an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship' (Grudem, 1994:515).

Williams (2005:45) defines it, 'a covenant is a relationship between persons, begun by the sovereign determination of the greater party, in which the greater commits himself to the lesser in the context of mutual loyalty, in which mutual obligations serve as illustrations of that loyalty.'¹

Key concepts: **relationship, mutual obligations.**

¹ A good overview to Bible from covenant perspective cf. Michael Williams, *Far as the Curse is found*, (2005). Other books on covenant theology include Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, Thomas McComiskey, *The Covenants of the Promise*, and William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*.

In the ancient world, a covenant is a binding contract between two parties, both of whom have certain obligations. But it was not a relationship between two equal parties. The stronger party i.e. God outlined the terms. The weaker party i.e. man, cannot negotiate the terms. He can only choose to accept or reject it.

In Old Testament times, for example, it was common for powerful nations to enter into covenantal agreements with smaller and weaker nations. The former guaranteed the vassal state protection and benefits, while the latter gave the powerful nation their loyalty.

By keeping their obligations, the vassal state would enjoy blessings; disloyalty would bring sanctions or punishment. (See Fee and Stuart, chapter 9 for a discussion.)

Key elements of a covenant include:

1. Introduction of the two parties involved;
2. Statement of obligations;
3. Role of the mediator; and
4. Declaration of blessings and curses.

At the heart of God's covenant with man in Scripture is the promise that: 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'

This covenant formula is repeated throughout Scripture e.g. Genesis 17:7-8; Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3. (The writer of Hebrews speaks of an 'eternal covenant' in 13:20.) God's people will live in God's place under God's rule.

The covenant shows us how God wants to relate to humanity. A relationship between man and his Creator cannot be automatically assumed. Through a covenant, God tells people how he wants them to act and makes promises to how he will act toward them (Grudem, 1994:515).

Like any relationship, God's covenant with man undergoes changes over time in the biblical story. Relationships deepen and mature. A couple who took their wedding vows aren't the same people 30 years down the road. The relationship displays continuity with the past, but matures and changes over time. This is the way we should think about the 'covenants of the promise' (Eph. 2:12) found in the storyline of the Bible.

FROM CREATION TO REBELLION (Adam to Abraham)

The pattern of God's relationship with Mankind (Genesis 1 to Genesis 2)

- God is sovereign over all creation (Ge. 1-2).
- God makes a covenant with Adam (Ge. 1:28-30, cf. 2:16-17; Hos. 6:7; Ro. 5:12-19).
- Adam was to live in God's place under God's rule.

Although the word 'covenant' is not explicitly used in the Genesis narrative about Adam, the essential parts of a covenant are all there e.g. the identities of the two

parties involved, the binding set of stipulations for the relationship, the consequences of obedience and disobedience.

Hosea 6:7 affirms the covenantal nature of this relationship. Similarly the word covenant doesn't appear in 2 Samuel 7, but Scripture elsewhere presents it as a covenantal promise to David in Psalm 89:19-37. Jeremiah speaks about a covenant with creation (cf. Jer. 33:20-21, 25-26). So the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah understood God's creation action to involve the establishment of a covenant.

Support for God's covenant with Adam also comes in Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-19 i.e. the parallels between Adam and Christ. Just as Christ is presented in the New Testament as the mediator of the new covenant (cf. Hebrews 12:24), so Adam represented the whole human race under the old covenant.

EXERCISE 1

1. Elements of covenant with Adam in Genesis 1:1-2:24.

- God and Man introduced as the two parties. God is introduced as the sovereign creator or king over all creation. (God is telling the people of Israel who he is e.g. how he is superior to all other false gods around them including the sun and moon, who were worshipped by some.)
 - The stronger party (God) makes clear his intent with the weaker parties (Creation). Plants, animals and persons have their specific place and roles determined by God. Each has their place. The sun governs the day, while the moon rules over the night. The fish multiply and fill the waters. Likewise the birds and land animals. They all have their task. As the psalmist writes, 'all things serve you' (Ps. 119:91, cf. Ps. 98:7-8).
 - God's covenant conditions with Adam were spelled out in Genesis 1:26-30. Adam was to exercise a limited sovereignty over the world (cf. Psalm 8:3-8) and rule it on God's behalf under God's guidance. God administers his covenant with all creation through his chosen covenant mediator, Adam. Or to put it another way, Adam mediates God's rule to creation.
 - (Adam is different from all creation because only he is free to obey or disobey. The animals and stars don't and can't respond in this way. Their obedience is involuntary. Man's obedience has a moral dimension to a holy God.)
 - Blessings would follow obedience to his role, while curses would follow disobedience. The curse is made explicit in Genesis 2:16-17. Implicit is the promise of obedience i.e. God would be in their midst and they would enjoy eternal life through the 'tree of life' (Ge. 2:9, cf. Rev. 22:2).
2. Man has a special relationship with God. Only he is made in 'the image of God.' Only he can know God personally. He is like God in his responsibility to rule, his ability to love and relate, and capacity to make moral choices.

Man is unique within the created order. He is called to be God's agent or mediator of God's covenant with creation. A world without Man therefore is incomplete. God called Man to live in God's place (Eden) under God's rule.

Humans are meant to relate to one another. God intended us for community. Our sexual differentiation should be understood in part, to show that humans image God not individually but in relationship to other human beings. Humans are called to reflect God's divine presence, will and love in the created order.

3. The New Jerusalem in Revelation 22 is the perfected Eden. Familiar landmarks include the river and tree of life. The curse will be taken away and the people will see God face to face once more. This perfected Eden is no longer a garden but a city.

The pattern broken by Adam's sin (Genesis 3)

- Adam, tempted by Satan, broke his covenant with God (cf. Hos. 6:7).
- Adam's sin spoiled everything in creation. All mankind (cf. Ro. 5:12-19) and creation (Ro. 8:19-25) is affected by Adam's disobedience.
- By grace, God initiates a rescue plan against sin and death (Ge. 3:14-15, cf. Gal. 3:16-29).

EXERCISE 2

1. Sin does not belong to creation. Everything God created was 'very good.' Sin is an intruder in the created order. The NT identifies the snake as Satan (Rev. 12:9, 20:2). (Few details are given about Satan's origin. The biblical author does not set out to answer all our questions in the text. What we know is Satan is not God's equal. The NT speaks about a prior rebellion in the angelic world i.e. 2Pe. 2:4, Jude 6.)

Satan's tactic is to question, accuse and distort God's word and character. He starts by approaching Eve rather than Adam (cf. 1Ti. 2:14). By approaching her with a question, Satan flatters her and dispels any fear she might feel about him as he casts her in the role of an authority in religious matters.

Satan distorts God's command by making God's gracious command harsher than what it actually is (Ge. 3:1). Satan tries to plant a seed of doubt into her mind about God's character and command. He focuses her mind on what God prohibits rather than allow.

Satan also casts doubt about the consequences of disobedience – 'you will not surely die.' He reduced the penalty of disobedience i.e. death won't happen, it's merely a threat. Why? Satan says God is selfish. God is holding back Eve's potential to 'be like God' (Ge. 3:5).

Eve falls for it. She came to believe Satan's words rather than God's word. The phrase 'who was with her' in v.6 is significant. It shows that Adam was present throughout the conversation but said nothing. He didn't defend God's honour and abdicated his headship role.

2. Sin has serious consequences. Adam's sin meant they wanted independence from God's rule. They are denying God's rightful place in creation and in their lives. Sin corrupts man's relationship with God, other human beings and with the world. Since Adam is the covenant representative of all humankind (cf. Ro. 5:17), his sin alienated the entire human race from God.

The earth is cursed (cf. Ro. 8:20, Hos. 4:2-3).

The relationship between man and woman is ruined (Ge. 2:25, 3:7). Neither took full responsibility for their actions (Ge. 3:12-13). The created order is distorted. The woman now 'desire' her husband (Ge. 3:16). This is not so much a reference to sexual desire, but a longing to usurp his authority (cf. Eph. 5:22-24) and control him. (The same word 'desire' is used in this sense in Ge. 4:7.)

Man's relationship with God is broken. Adam hides from God (Ge. 3:8). He is afraid of his own creator (Ge. 3:10). And he is ultimately banished from God's presence (Ge. 3:23-24).

3. God spoke a word of grace even in the midst of judgment (Ge. 3:15). Jesus is the offspring of Eve, promised to Abraham, who will finally defeat Satan (cf. Gal. 3:16-29).
4. Adam represented the entire human race in God's covenant with him. And Adam's sin is imputed to the human race. Through Jesus, the exact opposite happens. Jesus represents the elect humanity in God's new covenant with him. Jesus' covenant brings life rather than death. As Paul wrote in 1Co. 15:22, 'for as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.'

The effect of Adam's sin (Genesis 4 to Genesis 5)

- Sin takes root in Adam's family (cf. Cain and Abel, Ge. 4:1-24).
- God's rescue plan begins (Ge. 4:25-26).
- No one escapes God's judgment - 'then he died' (Ge. 5)
- Sin corrupts entire human family and mars creation (Ge. 6:5-7)

God's response to man's sin (Genesis 6 to Genesis 11)

- God sends a flood (Ge. 6-8) as an act of **judgment**.
- *'The Flood shows the ultimate destiny of a world under sin'* (Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*).
- The Flood shows how sin: (1) affects all creation, (2) requires God's judgment, and (3) breeds corruption in the human race.
- God makes a covenant with Noah (Ge. 9:1-17) as an act of **grace**. (Rainbow as sign of covenant, Ge. 9:16-17, cf. Rev. 4:3)

- Through his covenant with Noah, God: (1) preserves the believing 'seed' (Ge. 3:15-16), (2) preserves creation, and (3) reaffirm man's covenantal place within creation.
- Man's problem not solved. Rebellion persists and grows, culminating in Tower of Babel (Ge. 11:1-9).

EXERCISE 3

1. God's covenant with Noah shows God's mercy by withholding judgment on creation. God will not allow the sin of man to undo his creational order or redemptive purposes (Ge. 8:21-22, cf. Romans 8:19-21). God is protecting his creation from the creature that is his image bearer. Man was meant to rule on God's behalf. Instead his sin poisons and destroys it.

(The prohibition of eating meat with lifeblood and against shedding the blood of others should be read in light of God protecting creation and mankind from his worst enemy i.e. himself.)

God and Noah with all creation (not just God's chosen people) are the parties to the covenant. Noah is the covenant mediator. God promises not to destroy the earth. (This is not the same as the promise of eternal life.) Although God calls Noah into his obedient service, this covenant is not dependent on sinful man.

The rainbow is the sign of this covenant. The rainbow re-appears in Rev. 4:3. The bow reminds God of his promise. It is a sign of his grace in the midst of judgment. It reminds the world that he is faithful to his world. God will not abandon it.

2. Genesis 9:1-3 echoes Genesis 1:22 and 1:28. God is re-establishing his covenant with man and creation. Sin has stained all creation. The Flood is God's divine response to wash away the stain of man over all creation.

This covenant is not with Noah and his family alone, but with all of creation (Ge. 9:12-17). His intent is to preserve it. The blessing is a negative one: 'never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood' (Ge. 9:11).

Unlike other covenants, this one is not contingent upon human response. 'I will establish my covenant,' God declares. The sign is not circumcision e.g. Abraham. No special command or statement of obligation is given to Noah. Noah's obedience is not a factor in this covenant. The covenant sign, for example, doesn't require any active participation on man's part.

3. Pentecost is a reversal of Babel.

John Stott in his commentary (1990:68) wrote: 'At Babel human languages were confused and nations were scattered; in Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ, prefiguring the great day when the redeemed company will be drawn "from every nation, tribe, people and language." Besides, at Babel earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth.'