

Covenants of God I

Background Leading Up to the Old Covenant

Michael Heiss—August 22, 2015

Once again, good morning, everyone! This morning we're going to take a look at a subject that is always fascinating to me. It's way too big to go through the whole thing today, so we're going to look at the backdrop, the background leading up to what we call *the Old Covenant*.

God made many covenants during the period of time of Adam to Jesus. He made covenants with nations and He made covenants with individuals. But the Old Covenant was a special covenant that God made with the nation of Israel as a whole. But in reality, that was simply an enlargement of a covenant He made generations and centuries before, beginning with Abraham. We're going see that, and I hope you'll find it to be interesting and instructive.

First of all, where do you find the Old Covenant used or mentioned. Do realize that there is only one time in the entirety of the Bible where the term *New Covenant* is mentioned. Obviously, it's not going to be in the Old Testament period, because there was only one covenant there with Israel.

It's found in 2-Cor. in the New Testament. This is the Apostle Paul speaking and he's talking about the *administration of death* and how glorious it was that the new one is going to be even more glorious.

2-Corinthians 3:13: "For *we are* not like Moses, who put a veil over his face, so that the children of Israel could not gaze to the end upon *the glory* that is *now* being set aside. But their minds were blinded; for to the present hour the same veil *has not been* removed, *but* remains **at the reading of the Old Covenant**; which *veil* is removed in Christ" (vs 13-14). There's more that we can say about this verse, but two things:

1. Paul calls it *the Old Covenant*
2. Paul says it's being removed

Well, still in the process of being removed. It won't be fully removed until Christ returns to fully ratify the New Covenant.

- Why is it being removed?
- Why did God have to remove what we call *the Old Covenant*?

The answers are given in two places. Paul also mentions the reason and he's quoting from Jeremiah:

Hebrews 8:7: "For if the first *covenant* had been faultless, *then* no provision for a second *covenant* would have been made. But since He

found fault with them..." (vs 7-8).

You know the 'ah ha' moment? *Here's the 'ah ha' moment!* The fault was with the people. The fault wasn't with God's Law, it wasn't with the statutes or ordinances; it was with them. Now for a word of encouragement for us where Paul talks about the days are coming with the New Covenant.

Verse 12: "For I will be merciful toward their unrighteousnesses, and their sins and their lawlessness I will not remember ever again." That's for us, too.

How many times have you—I know I have—thought things you shouldn't have thought, done stupid things, said things and wish you hadn't said. Remember, when you think a thought, it's fascinating, that thought goes up into the ether, it's there. That's how God reads minds. He doesn't have to get inside your head; He really doesn't. I suppose He could, but all He has to do is read your thoughts. Your thoughts are ascending, and He has a receiver. I have no idea what it looks like, I don't know how it functions, but He's got a receiver and that receiver can pick up any signal, any thought, by any human being, at any time.

God promises He'll turn it off. He promises that He'll never remember them again. Talk about better promises. So, the same thing is true in Jeremiah. Why is it that the fault was with them?

Zachariah 4:6: "Then he answered and spoke to me, saying, 'This *is* the Word of the LORD to Zerubbabel, saying, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the LORD of hosts."

There, in part, is your answer, not by might or human strength, but "...by My Spirit..." If you don't have the Spirit of God you really can't live up to the Old Covenant. In fact, you can't live up to any covenant.

There were some people who could, in a sense, physically do what the Law requires. Remember Zacharias and Elizabeth walking in the Law of the Lord blameless? But there weren't too many of Zacharias's.

God Himself confirms this. Let's go to the Law itself. God is, in essence, praising Israel for what Israel said, but notice the caveat:

Deuteronomy 5:28: "And the LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me. And the LORD said to me, 'I have heard the voice of the

words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They have well *said* all that they have spoken. Oh, that there were such a heart in them that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always...” (vs 28-29). That was a problem. Read carefully Jer. 31 & Heb. 8, God says that in the New Covenant, ‘I’m going to write My Law in their hearts’; through His Spirit.

So, until God gives His Spirit nobody was really able to keep that Old Covenant properly. That Old Covenant was a covenant that God originally made with Abraham, and went clear through and enlarged it a great ratification ceremony.

Before this issue of the ‘burning bush,’ Exodus 2:23: “And it came to pass after many days the king of Egypt died. And the children of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and **God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob**” (vs 23-24). He was going to expound on that covenant. Proof of that in:

Psalms 105:6: “O you seed of Abraham His servant, you children of Jacob His chosen. He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth. He has remembered His covenant forever, the word, which He commanded to a thousand generations; the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac; and He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant” (vs 6-10). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and then down to Israel.

Before we see how God revealed this covenant in stages, I would like to bring up two concepts, two words that we have in English: *obedience* and *fairness*. They do not exist in Hebrew! In fact, you’ve heard of *obey My voice*. Well, it’s written in the English, and that’s correct, but there is no separate word for *obedience* and *fairness*. There’s a reason for that. God is never fair; He’s never called Himself fair. He never says, ‘Be you fair as I am fair.’ It does not exist in Hebrew.

Unless we understand that, when you read the words of the Old Covenant—Exo. 21-23 and Deuteronomy—and you see what God says should happen, if He does this then you do that. WOW! That’s not fair! That doesn’t seem right!

Well, you’re correct from a *human* point of view! But you have to see it as God sees it. I didn’t write the Hebrew language, I didn’t create it, I had nothing to do with the Bible being written in Hebrew. **God did!** And *the language expresses His mind, because He created that language!*

Obedience:

You’ve seen *obey My voice!* The word for obedience is ‘shama’—*to hear, hear Me, obey Me*. It’s the same word. Why is that? *Because in Hebrew there’s no such thing as ‘yeah, yeah, I hear you, so shut up’ and you go and do your own thing. No! If you hear God you take in what He says and it leads to obedience!*

For God there is no such distinction between hearing and obeying. *To hear is to obey!* Think on that; believe me, it took me quite a while until I got it through my thick skull. Then when you read the Scriptures, you begin to understand His thinking. It’s all one with God.

Fairness/Fair:

- you’ve got to be fair
- it’s not fair
- he got the job and I didn’t, it’s not fair
- he’s a millionaire, it’s not fair

Mr. Obama talks about fairness; we’ve got to have fairness. The American people want a fair shot. They want a fair shake.

I know what a vanilla or a chocolate shake is, but I’ve never seen a fair shake. I don’t know what a ‘fair shot’ is. Do any of you? In one sense I do. I like the game of baseball. I know that if I’m batter up, I’m going to hit a line drive down the left field line. A fair shot—right? It’s a shot going down the left field line. If it lands on one side of the line it’s a foul ball. But if it lands on the inside of that line or on that line it’s a fair ball, in play.

I know that, but otherwise I don’t know what *fairness* is. God never describes Himself as being fair. There are two adjectives that are used to describe God: *Holy and Righteous!*

Leviticus 19:2: “Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be Holy, for I the LORD your God am Holy.’” Set apart! It didn’t say fair; never did.

That’s an American thing! You can hear all over baseball diamonds, football fields, ‘That’s not fair! You’re too big! That’s not fair!’ ***You never hear God saying that!***

Righteous:

Psa. 1—we sing it; ‘Blessed and happy is the man who does never walk astray.’ Well, in the last verse of this Psalm, and we can look at many Scriptures that say the same thing:

Psalms 1:6: “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish.” It doesn’t say that He knows the way of the *fair*. That’s not to say that God is unfair. I don’t

mean that. He does what is just. But when you look at the statutes and the judgments and you see the result of them. Unless you understand that God has something in mind, you would say, 'He's unfair.' I've heard, for example, from time to time, I tune in foolishly to Jon Stewart or Bill Maher and I listen from time to time and they call God 'the worst mass murderer in history' — the Flood. That's not fair!

Well, you have to understand how God thinks and what the world was like and what those people were doing. That was justice/righteousness!

God never said it was fair. After all, if we're going to say God is not fair, remember Sodom and Gomorrah? A cry came up to God and He comes down and talks to Abraham and tells Abraham what He's going to do. What does Abraham say? Partially Abraham played the 'fairness card.'

Abraham said, 'Oh, should not the Lord God, the God of all the earth, be just? Will you destroy the entire city, what if I find 50? What if I find 50 people?' *God says, 'Okay, if I find 50 I'll spare the city.'*

'Oh, my lord, what if there are 45?' *I will spare for 45!* And Abraham goes down to 40, 30, 20 and 10. Isn't God, in a sense being fair? 'If I can find just 10 righteous people I'll spare that whole city.'

You know, He couldn't even find ten. There was really only one: Lot. He two daughters went with him, so they were part of it. His wife was a fourth, but we know what happened to her when she looked back. She didn't just look back, when you read that in Hebrew it means she looked back *longing to go back*. It wasn't just a quick glance over her shoulder, she didn't want to leave Sodom.

The point being is that we need to remember that ***God is a just God, a righteous God, a Holy God! Fairness has nothing to do with anything!***

We're going to quickly go through where God reveals His covenant, and He did it in stages.

Genesis 12:1: "And the LORD said to Abram, 'Get out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house into a land that I will show you. And I will make *of* you a great nation. And I will bless you and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you. And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed'" (vs 1-3).

This is short and concise and not much detail is given. Just 'Abram get out of the Chaldees and get to a land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation.' God also confirms that in Gen. 15.

This is where we have the maledictory oath, where God is promising Abraham things, the sacrifice, and God says:

Genesis 15:1: "After these things the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Fear not, Abram, I *am* your shield and your exceedingly great reward.' And Abram said, 'Lord GOD, what will You give me since I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* this Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'Behold, You have given no seed to me; and lo, one born in my house is my heir.' And behold, the Word of the LORD *came* to him saying, 'This man shall not be your heir; but he that shall come forth out of your own loins shall be your heir'" (vs 1-4). Don't worry about that.

Verse 5: "And He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward the heavens and number the stars—if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your seed be.'

Verse 13: "And He said to Abram, 'You must surely know that your seed shall be sojourners in a land *that is* not theirs (and shall serve them *and they shall* afflict them) four hundred years.'"

You notice that God isn't saying that Israel is going to be afflicted for 400 years; it just says that they're going to be sojourners for 400 years. The affliction—and it was there—was nowhere near 400 years, and God says that He will judge that nation. Now it's expanded to this land. We know that God gave it to Abraham, but now He expands it to Isaac:

Genesis 26:2: "And the LORD appeared to him [Isaac] and said, 'Do not go down into Egypt. Live in the land, which I shall tell you of. Stay in this land, and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your seed, I will give all these lands; and I will establish the oath, which I swore to Abraham your father'" (vs 2-3).

God is continuing the covenant, the promise, and is now giving it to Isaac.

Verse 4: "And I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and will give to your seed all these lands. And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." Isn't that what God told Abraham, that 'in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed'? Same covenant; same promise.

Verse 5: "**Because Abraham obeyed My voice...**" Once again, that word *obey* is to hear, because to hear God and listen to Him means to obey Him. So, it's properly translated obey. There's nothing wrong with it, but I just want to emphasize the fact that there is a distinction in the English, but there is no distinction in the Hebrew.

God says that '***if you hear Me, then you will***

obey Me! If you do not obey Me then you never really heard Me, you never really listened to Me. You just pretended to.' There's the distinction. 'You gave Me lip service, but you never really heard Me.'

Abraham "...and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (v 5).

- What laws?
- What statutes?
- What commandments?
- *The same laws that we read about in Exo. 21-23 and Deut.!*

They were there, it's just that it wasn't ratified before an entire nation. But that was all part of the covenant that was made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was all there. Now that promise was expanded to Jacob.

Genesis 35:9: "And God appeared to Jacob again after he came out of Padan Aram and blessed him. And God said to him, 'Your name *is* Jacob. Your name shall not be called Jacob any more, but Israel shall be your name.' And He called his name Israel. And God said to him, 'I *am* God Almighty.... [El Shaddai; the same thing God said to Abraham] ...Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall be from you... [more detail God is bringing out] ...and kings shall come out of your loins. And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give to you, and to your seed after you I will give the land.' And God went up from him in the place where He talked with him" (vs 9-13).

There we have it! There we have the promise going from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, and it's going to be given to Israel as a whole afterward.

That promise became unconditional. Here God is promising it, but He's not stating in unconditional terms, even though God means what He says.

Genesis 22—here is where we owe so much to father Abraham, and he was called *the friend of God*. In fact, we say, 'God is our Friend.' That was Ben Franklin's term for God: *That Great Friend*. Before the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia Franklin told the delegates there, 'We need to call upon God; have we forgotten a Great Friend? Do we think we no longer need His help?'

Today I think we have forgotten that *Great Friend* as a nation. But Ben Franklin didn't. The interesting thing is that when we go through the Bible, we will see where God says, 'Abraham is My friend.' It's one thing to say that God is our Great Friend, but isn't it something else for the God of heaven and earth to say, 'This man, he is My friend.' That is something that God doesn't do very lightly! Trust me, He doesn't say that lightly.

Notice why. This is the binding of Isaac. God spared Isaac and had a substitute ram, and:

Genesis 22:15: "And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, 'By Myself have I sworn,' says the LORD, 'because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son; that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and as the sand, which is upon the seashore. And your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, **because you have obeyed My voice**'" (vs 15-18).

At this point everything becomes unconditional. No matter what happens, God is going to give those blessings to Israel. It doesn't say that He's going to continue to give them if they disobey Him, but they're going to receive them as a result of what Abraham did.

Remember, God said of Abraham, "...because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son..." What do you think God was also thinking at that time?

He knew that come a thousand years later, *He* was going to sacrifice *His* Son. So, *Abraham in essence was willing to do what the Father would one day do for us!* This is profound! It really, really is when you stop and think about it.

Here we have this promise, this covenant, and it's a covenant with laws and statutes and judgments. God gives a warning:

Deuteronomy 4:23: "Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which He made with you, and make you a graven image, a likeness of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you." God tells us to beware and don't forget the covenant.

Verse 31: "For the LORD your God *is* a merciful God.... [not a *fair* God, but a merciful God] ...**He will not forsake you, nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers**, which He swore to them." God says that He is not going to forget the covenant, He says, '**Don't you forget the covenant with ME!**' If you do you can read about the curses in Leviticus, what happens if you forget those covenants.

This morning my purpose was to give the backdrop, a background of the covenant itself passed on from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Israel. The fact that God is righteous and Holy, not necessarily fair, and when we go into some of those laws, some of those procedures, we'll see how there could be unintended consequences. But God had a reason for it.

Let me just give one today, which if we as a nation had followed—the death penalty. God established the death penalty: if man shed's man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed (Gen. 9). Yet, look at innocent people who have wound up on death row and in some cases executed. Why? *They only followed half of what God said! They didn't follow the other half!*

God laid a condition on the death penalty. 'In the mouth of two or more witnesses...' In all the cases that I have read about where the sentence was commuted, not guilty—DNA evidence proved it was impossible—they didn't have two or more witnesses; in some cases not even one. It was circumstantial. What if a guy says, 'Look, I was hiding in the house when he came in; I saw him bludgeon her to death. I saw what he did.' Yet, God says, 'I don't care. No death penalty.' Why not? Because God was concerned that since He was dealing with human beings—He had turned this whole administration over to humans and He knew what human nature was like—they make mistakes. He knew that there was much less of a chance of injustice being done if there were two witnesses instead of just one.

You can say that two witnesses can lie, too. I remember two or more witnesses at Jesus' trial and they knew how to lie! But in general it was a safeguard. God was willing to spare the life of what, in reality, was a guilty man because His concern was that an innocent person should not be executed.

You see the mind of God in these statutes. We'll get to them, and even that one in greater detail in the future.

Scriptural References:

- 1) 2 Corinthians 3:13-14
- 2) Hebrews 8:7-8, 12
- 3) Zechariah 4:6
- 4) Deuteronomy 5:28-29
- 5) Exodus 2:23-24
- 6) Psalm 105:6-10
- 7) Leviticus 19:2
- 8) Psalm 1:6
- 9) Genesis 12:1-3
- 10) Genesis 15:1-5, 13
- 11) Genesis 26:2-5
- 12) Genesis 35:9-13
- 13) Genesis 22:15-18
- 14) Deuteronomy 4:23, 31

Scripture referenced, not quoted:

- Jeremiah 31
- Hebrews 8

- Exodus 21-23
- Genesis 9

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